LEARNING FROM THOSE WHO WERE SUCCESSFUL: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE ENTRANTS WHO AS ADULT LEARNERS COMPLETED THEIR BACCALAUREATE ONLINE

A thesis presented
by
Michael Boudreau
to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

in the field of

Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
July 2017
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of online, adult learners who navigated transitions and overcame challenges to succeed in earning a baccalaureate online via a community college starting point. Through studying these students who were actually successful, by examining their pathways, and by finding out how they succeeded, information was gained that can help higher education professionals better understand, engage, educate, and support community college entrants who seek to complete a four-year degree. A phenomenological approach was implemented.

The study site for this research was a large, urban, private university in the northeastern United States. Specifically, the study site was one of the colleges within that university which enrolls a high number of online, adult baccalaureate-seekers who began their studies at the community college level. The research participants were adult learners who completed their baccalaureate online and who began their studies at the community college level as campus-based students. Participants were students who reached their four-year degree goal in 2016. Specifically, five undergraduate degree completers from an April 2016 degree conferral were chosen.

A number of common findings emerged from the research. Specifically, inner drive or self-motivation, influence of family and friends as motivators, overall institutional support, a specific person or event, and success paving the way for more success were found to be important to student success and persistence. Discussion of the findings and implications for institutions as well as future researchers, were discussed.

Keywords: community college student persistence, student engagement, innovation in higher education, baccalaureate attainment, adult learner support, online student support
Acknowledgements

There are seemingly countless sources to which I owe a debt of gratitude for making this moment possible. Of course, as a (learning, growing) Christian, I give thanks to God for allowing me to exist happy, healthy, and whole. From there, my deepest and most sincere thanks go to my family. Most importantly of all, thank you to my wife Kara. Thank you for being the first (way ahead of me) to confidently and emphatically say “you are going to get this doctorate” and for never wavering along the way. Thanks too for providing inspiration and encouragement when it was most needed, sacrificing your time and energy to help me take forward steps on the journey. No one has been more influential, more helpful, more invested than you. I would not be the person I am without you shining so brightly in my life.

Thanks to my late grandfather Karl, who dedicated his life to the education and well-being of others and who encouraged me from the beginning, unconditionally, tirelessly, and happily. Thanks to my late grandmother Edith, who treated me as an equal when I was five-year old child just as much as when I was thirty-year old adult. Without their knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, it is uncertain where I would be today. Thanks to my daughter Ava for giving me a second childhood, asking me many, many questions, brightening my life, and being excited for wanting to call me “Dr. Dad.” Thanks to my dog Winston for loyalty and unconditionally resting by my side many, many times until 2:00 AM or later – never, ever complaining about the bright lights nor screeching music on internet radio as I toiled away with my research.

I would like to thank Dr. Carolyn Bair for her unwavering support, insight, guidance, and thorough professionalism as my thesis advisor. Dr. Bair’s strong knowledge of research methodology and higher educational trends coupled with her enthusiasm for my progress from
square one were of great value throughout. Dr. Bair always had useful suggestions and thought-provoking ideas that directly related to my research. Second, I would like to thank Dr. Ronald Brown, who seamlessly stepped in as my insightful, encouraging second reader. Thirdly, I would like to thank Dr. Leslie Hitch. Dr. Hitch was doubly helpful to me. As an instructor, she gave me support and encouragement early on in my EdD pursuit, reiterating that “passion and persistence” were keys to success. After her retirement and as my third reader, she helped keep me on track and on goal. Without these three readers, there is no proposal, no thesis, no successful defense. Finally, other instructors in the EdD program, most notably Dr. Alison Dover, provided much needed support and guidance to best prepare me for meaningful research as well as develop skills I use daily in my professional career. Dr. Dover knew when to push when I should be pushed, and held out a hand when I needed pull. I would also like to thank: Dr. Richard Freeland, Dr. David Szabla, Dr. Joseph McNabb, Dr. Jane Edmonds, Dr. Lynda Beltz, and as aforementioned especially Dr. Dover.

My gratitude is extended to the students/graduates who participated in this study. Without them, there would be no study. With them, not only was I able move forward, but I learned multiple life lessons from each person as well as collectively. Their personal stories of success on their own were impressive and inspirational. Their ability to overcome obstacles in life and their selfless generosity shown to me inspired me and reinforced my joy as both student and higher education professional. Their stories extended beyond borders of school, family, work, friends, and individual experiences. I learned a lot about them, and a lot about myself, through hearing their tales of challenge and success. Their stories of challenge and success not only propelled them to greatness, they also continue to inspire me on my life’s path.
My colleagues at Northeastern University and elsewhere are also very well-deserving of my gratitude. There are too many folks to mention, some have come and gone, some are always there regardless of the circumstance, and all I owe some piece of my appreciation and thanks. I am especially in debt to those who have helped me grow along the way – raising the bar for me just by being the people they are. When they work with me/share their experiences, I am re-energized. Simply being a part of their story is a high honor. A little secret – I try to be around great people so I can become a better person! Several will surely follow and overtake me – they know who they are, even if they don’t think so right now. I have grown as a professional and as a person because of them. So too I thank my friends outside of the realm of higher education. They as well are too many to mention and have touched my journey in varying ways, though the hundreds-strong *Life Is Good* ultimate disc “family” sit atop that list!

There are many, many steps to completing a doctorate. Inspiration and energy come in many forms. These include but are not limited to a check-in on my progress, being part of my story, providing me the opportunity to smile when you smile, sharing philosophies and friendships. Thank you to all who were there with me and for me along the way. You clearly are very important to me. You helped me be a better student and a better, more fulfilled person to which I am eternally grateful.
**Table of Contents**

Abstract.........................................................................................................................2

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................3

Table of Contents..........................................................................................................6

Chapter One: Introduction............................................................................................11

  Purpose Statement.......................................................................................................11

  Statement of the Problem............................................................................................11

  Significance of the Problem.......................................................................................14

  The Research Question..............................................................................................17

  Summary of Doctoral Thesis Contents and Organization.........................................18

Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework.........................................................................19

  Introduction..............................................................................................................19

  Rationale for Conceptual Framework.......................................................................19

  Foundational Theory on Student Persistence: Tinto..............................................20

  Student Persistence Theories Focused on Online and/or Adult Learners..............23

    Kember’s Model of Student Progress.................................................................24

    Bean and Metzner.................................................................................................26

    Billings................................................................................................................27

  Other Noteworthy Theorists....................................................................................28

    Astin’s Theory of Involvement..........................................................................28

    Milem and Berger...............................................................................................30

  Summary..................................................................................................................31

Chapter Three: Literature Review..............................................................................33

  Introduction..............................................................................................................33

  Contemporary Challenges in Higher Education.....................................................35
How an IPA Approach Benefits this Specific Research.........................63
Site and Participants...............................................................................63
Data Collection......................................................................................66
Data Analysis.........................................................................................69
Validity and Credibility.........................................................................73
Protection of Human Subjects...............................................................76
Format of Interviews.............................................................................77
Limitations of the Study.........................................................................77
Statement of Positionality.....................................................................78

Chapter Five: Findings.........................................................................80

Introduction.............................................................................................80

Profile of the Participants.................................................................81

Common Findings Among the Data.....................................................86

   Inner-Drive or Self-Motivation as a Prime Factor
to their Ultimate Success.................................................................87

   Influence of Family and Friends as Motivators to Succeed
   andPersist.........................................................................................91

   Overall Institutional Support as Fostering Success/Creating
   Clear Pathways to Success...............................................................94

   Specific Person or Event at the Institution as Inspirational/Impactful.98

   Success Paving the Way for More Success.....................................101

Additional Findings.............................................................................103

   Student Experiences of Success Themselves as Inspirational to Others.103

   Attractiveness of University Offerings/Resources/Opportunities....106

   Faculty Support.................................................................................108
Introduction

Audience(s) That Could Benefit from the Research

Discussion

The Online Format

Themes

Themes and the Conceptual Framework

Inner-Drive or Self-Motivation as a Prime Factor to their Ultimate Success

Influence of Family and Friends as Motivators to Succeed and Persist

Overall Institutional Support as Fostering Success/Creating Clear Pathways to Success

Specific Person or Event at the Institution as Inspirational/Impactful

Success Paving the Way for More Success

Themes and the Literature Review

Inner-Drive or Self-Motivation as a Prime Factor to their Ultimate Success

Influence of Family and Friends as Motivators to Succeed andPersist

Overall Institutional Support as Fostering Success/Creating Clear Pathways to Success

Specific Person or Event at the Institution as
Inspirational/Impactful .................................................................122
Success Paving the Way for More Success .................................123
Discussion of the Other Findings ....................................................123
Implications for Professional Practice ...........................................125
Course Format and Delivery Options ............................................126
Academic Advising .......................................................................126
Financial Aid ..................................................................................127
Building Affinity/Community .......................................................127
Implications for Further Research/Future Research Possibilities .....128
Implications for Others .................................................................129
Conclusion .....................................................................................130
References ......................................................................................134
Appendix A: IRB Introduction Memo to Participants .......................150
Appendix B: Telephone Conversation Script ..................................152
Appendix C: Interview Questions ..................................................153
Chapter One: Introduction

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to conduct scholarly research on community college entrants who continued on as adult learner students to attain their baccalaureate degrees online. The study narrates their starting point into higher education, their intended pathways, pathways actually taken, and experiences (obstacles and openings alike) along the way, to understand how and why they were successful in completing their degree. Specifically, the purpose of this phenomenological analysis was to identify successful adult students’ understandings through their experiences that contributed to the completion of their baccalaureate degrees in an online environment following an entry point as a community college student.

Statement of the Problem

Online/distance education has existed for a number of decades (Northeastern University Online, 2012; Stokes, 2011), although enrollment in online courses and degrees has grown considerably in recent years (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Conrad & Donaldson, 2009; Parsad & Lewis, 2008; United States Department of Education, 2012, 2016). Many reasons can begin to explain why this is so. The increase in students over the age of twenty-five beginning/returning to complete a course or degree (Johnson, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2012, 2016), recent added demands of the workforce, market demands, convenience (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Kolowich, 2011; LaBrie & Gallagher, 2012; Park, 2009; Parsad & Lewis, 2008), and technological advances (Park, 2009) can all be attributed to a significant upturn in online learning opportunities. At its best, online learning can provide worldwide access for students who otherwise could not attend school (LaBrie & Gallagher, 2012).
Moreover, it can literally bring together students from around the world quickly and conveniently (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; LaBrie & Gallagher, 2012) for the purpose of higher education learning opportunities.

Despite an increase in access and options that online learning has provided for students, especially in recent years, student needs are still a challenge for institutions that offer online learning opportunities. Quality-driven issues have historically plagued online learning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Dixson, 2010; Kolowich, 2011; Park, 2009; Richardson, Long, & Woodley, 2003; Shelton, 2010), contributing to student confusion, frustration with programs, and missed learning opportunities. In addition, the overall needs of online students have still been largely ignored by higher education leaders and administrators (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Bundy, 2004; Hansman, 2001) who have failed to understand just how online students differ from campus-based students. This can serve as an additional challenge in terms of student persistence and success (Coates, 2007; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Dixson, 2010; Richardson, Long, & Woodley, 2003; Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008).

Much the same can be said with respect to adult learners (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Adult learners (the terms non-traditional-aged students or adult learner students are also used to describe this population of students) are defined as students aged twenty-five and older (United States Department of Education, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016). Higher education institutions have offered programs and served non-traditional-aged students for decades. These long-standing practices have helped educate countless students towards reaching their academic and career-related goals. Nonetheless, not many institutions meaningfully differentiate between practices for engaging traditional-aged students and those for engaging non-traditional-aged
students. That is, they treat these students as having the same needs and thus provide the same programs/opportunities to all types of students (Bundy, 2004; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Hansman, 2001; Pappas & Jerman, 2004; Park, 2009; Venter, 2003). Without good understanding of effective practice for engaging and serving adult learners, colleges and universities will continue to struggle to engage and educate them (Aslanian, 2001; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Hansman, 2004; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Kasworm, 2008; Park, 2009; Venter, 2003), affecting overall student success percentages and more importantly, providing additional challenges to student persistence and success.

Adult learners who begin their studies at the community college level and wish to finish their baccalaureate may face challenges above and beyond their adult learner counterparts who began, and completed, by taking courses at a four-year institution. Studies have shown that students who begin their higher education career at the community college level are more likely to lower their expectations towards degree completion in comparison to their four-year counterparts (Alba & Lavin, 1981; Clark, 1980; Karabel, 1986, Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1998; Tinto, 2012). The lowering of expectations can appear in many forms, such as not pursuing a four-year degree, switching from a more academically-challenging major to one that allows for more open electives, and switching from advanced-level coursework to introductory-level coursework. In other words, by choosing a community college, students can be seen as self-selecting to lower expectations – educational and career related - than their four-year institution counterparts (Alba & Lavin, 1981, 1989; Clark, 1960, 1980; Karabel, 1986, Park & Pascarella, 2010; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1998).

Moreover, statistically, students who attend community colleges (all ages) have less of a chance of finishing a baccalaureate than their four-year institution counterparts (Crook & Lavin,
Choosing a community college path as a starting point, then, can be seen as increasing odds of failure to achieve a four-year degree goal (Park & Pascarella, 2010; Venezia & Krist, 2005). Students may put themselves at a competitive disadvantage for completing a four-year degree, attaining higher socioeconomic status, or reaching loftier higher education aspirations, such as graduate school (Crook & Lavin, 1989; Park & Pascarella, 2010; Venezia & Krist, 2005). This study examined those challenges as well as opportunities from the perspective of students who succeeded in reaching the goal of obtaining a baccalaureate degree and who completed that degree online.

**Significance of the Problem**

This research was important due to the sheer numbers of adult students and increasing numbers of online students in higher education (Johnson, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2014, 2016). Adult students are no longer a small slice of the higher education student body. In fact, the overall number of non-traditional-aged students between 2010 and 2015 rivals that of their traditional-age counterparts (Johnson, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2011, 2014, 2016). The number of online students, both in actual persons as well as percentage of all college students, is also becoming larger. The United States Department of Education (2011) predicted in 2011 that online students would surpass on-campus students in just a few years. Since the pool of students is large and shown to be increasing (United States Department of Education, 2014, 2016), the stakes are high for higher education institutions to assist in the persistence and success of these students – persistence directly relating to revenue benefits, higher graduation rates, more favorable alumni giving practices, and improved

This research was also important because it provides success stories of community college students who went on to complete their baccalaureate online. Much research focuses on drop-out, or negative factors but little research focuses on success, or positive factors. See table below for a comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research focusing on drop-out or other negative factors</th>
<th>Research focusing on success/persistence, or other positive factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Further research has shown that lowering expectations has a negative influence of varying degrees on students, faculty, staff, and curriculum (Bers, 2008; Clark, 1960, 1980; Stavres & Herder, 2014). It has additionally been argued that lowering of expectations has served to socialize students into lower tracks of education and economic development (Askin, 2007; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Dougherty & Kienzel, 2006; Venezia & Krist, 2005). While adult learner and online students have been known to experience high levels of marginalization, community college students have arguably experienced even higher levels of marginalization in higher education environments for a more sustained period of time (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Hansman, 2001; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Kasworm, 2008; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Venter, 2003).

A substantial percentage of students at the community college level are interested in reaching only a two-year degree goal (Askin, 2007; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012; United States Department of Education, 2005, 2011, 2014, 2016; Velez, 1985). Moreover, even the highest-aspiring of community college students can be affected by the lesser aspirations of others (Bers, 2008; Clark, 1960, 1980). Considering that college students in increasing numbers are choosing a community college starting point (Bers, 2008; Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; United States Department of Education, 2012, 2014, 2016), this phenomenon could potentially influence a larger pool of students. Success stories, on the other hand, can help keep (by inspiring, teaching, or otherwise exemplifying success) at-risk or lower expectation students
on the track to success. By learning of the lived experiences of successful students, other such students could adopt similar practices to help themselves be successful. Moreover, students with lower initial expectations might feel inspired by the higher aspirations of those who successfully completed a two-year degree and went on to complete a four-year degree.

Finally, the roles of community colleges within higher education made a study of success stories noteworthy. Community colleges enroll and support a significant percentage of students overall – regardless if a degree or certification is an end-goal. More than a third of all college students are attending community colleges (Horn & Nevill, 2006; United States Department of Education, 2005, 2011, 2014, 2016). Thus, community colleges touch/influence a high number of college students. In addition, eighty percent of community college students have four-year degree completion goals (United States Department of Education, 2005, 2011, 2014, 2016). Discerning information in the form of patterns of success could inspire practitioners to develop better practices to support future adult learner, online four-year degree seekers who start off at the community college level.

**The Research Question**

*How do adult learner, baccalaureate seekers who began at a community college successfully navigate the transition from a two-year higher education institution to completing their baccalaureate online at a four-year higher education institution?*

It is important to gain an in-depth understanding from the perspectives of successful students as to what they think were the reasons they were successful in completing their baccalaureate degrees in an online setting after having completed their first two years in a community college environment. Specifically, what are their “stories,” and what do they believe
accounts for their success? What is their understanding of how they overcame challenges and succeeded?

Summary of Doctoral Thesis Contents and Organization

This Doctoral Thesis is organized into six distinct sections. Chapter One serves as the introduction and includes the overview and purpose of the study. It covers the importance of conducting a study to analyze online, adult learners with a four-year degree completion goal who began their studies at the community college level, as well as why such a study from a student persistence/success point of view is critical. Chapter Two provides details about the conceptual framework selected for this study, as well as information about why the conceptual framework was selected and how it was used in the study. Chapter Three includes the literature review and reviews student characteristics, their unique needs, student engagement, and suggested practices needed to support these types of students based upon the literature. Chapter Four details the research design/methodology as well as the data collection and analysis procedures for the study. Chapter Five documents the findings based upon the participant interviews. This includes common themes found through analysis of the participant interviews and experiences. The sixth and final Chapter consists of conclusions and implications based upon the study, including summary, discussion, implications for higher educational institutions, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework

Introduction

A conceptual framework can be seen as a practical means of providing scaffolding for a particular study. In addition, it serves as an effective lens through which to examine research questions. Both can provide structure and focus to the study (Breakwell, Hammon, Fife-Schaw, & Smith, 2007). A conceptual framework can additionally serve to validate or solidify a researcher’s own theory, helping to clearly define the researcher’s thoughts and postulations (Creswell, 2007, 2009). By carefully choosing a conceptual framework, a researcher can provide justification for a study as well as provide a means through which to understand/explain a particular problem of practice. A conceptual framework is thus important from a structural point of view as well as from the point of view of conceptualizing a problem or seeking a solution (Breakwell, Hammon, Fife-Schaw, & Smith, 2007; Creswell, 2007, 2009).

Rationale for Conceptual Framework

This researcher chose to employ a conceptual framework for three distinct reasons. First, there was no one theorist who focused specifically on the same student population on which this researcher focused (adult learner online baccalaureate degree completers who began at a community college starting point) and from the perspective of their success stories (why students succeed as opposed to why students fail). Some theorists focused on adult learner students, some on online students, some on students beginning at a community college level with a baccalaureate degree pursuit. Some looked at success stories, but with respect to traditional-aged students. By using a conceptual framework, the researcher was able to pull together discussion and analysis of each aspect of this particular student group. Second, choosing a conceptual
framework as opposed to a theoretical framework allows for multiple perspectives. Finally, early in the researcher’s information-gathering stage, it became clear to the researcher that a conceptual framework option would better serve as the lens for the research to be conducted. Using a conceptual framework for this research presented a more precise logical lens and resource to identify student persistence and success; research questions were informed and focus was placed on the specific student population studied/researched. Moreover, it was important to begin with foundational theory on student persistence, as foundational theory on student persistence influenced later theorists.

**Foundational Theory on Student Persistence: Tinto**

One of the earliest theoretical frameworks to address issues related to student persistence is Tinto’s (1975) interactionalist theory on student retention. Complementing this theory is his corresponding Student Integration Model (1993). Tinto’s is actually not the seminal model with respect to student persistence. That distinction likely goes to Spady (1971) for his studies on the interaction between student characteristics and campus environmental factors. Nonetheless, Tinto’s adaptation of Spady’s Model (Lint, 2013) has become the standard that countless scholars reference, critique, and emulate (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Lint, 2013; McGivney, 2009). According to Tinto’s theory (1993), a student is more likely to persist when (s)he becomes successfully integrated into the institution. This notion of integration must be both academic and social in nature, so that the student experiences both an academic and social commitment from the institution and connection to the institution (Jensen, 2011; Tinto 1975, 1999, 2005, 2012; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Integration is influenced by a variety of pre-college factors or characteristics, including socioeconomic factors, academic preparation, peer influences, family characteristics, and personal perceptions of college (Braxton,
Integration is also influenced by a variety of factors during college, including the above as well as motivation, institutional commitment, institutional resources, and quality of academic program (Braxton, 2000; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Harvey-Smith, 2002; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008).

Tinto’s Student Integration Model (1975, 1993) complements his theory on student retention. In the Model, Tinto illustrated how students can integrate – both academically and socially - into a college/university environment. Integration can support retention and persistence, which leads to graduation/program completion. Conversely, a lack of integration can cause alienation/marginalization, factors which can lead to drop out. Persistence can be added to the discourse because although Tinto researched retention (institutional-based actions), his theory also helps to explain persistence factors (student-based actions) (Jensen, 2011; Tinto, 1993, 2012). Academic integration takes place in the form of intellectual development and can be measured by grading (individual grades, course grades, and overall grade point average). Social integration takes place in the form of interactions among students and faculty – or among students and other students - and can also be measured by grading as defined above at varying levels. Students (undergraduate students are discussed) who can effectively master both the academic and social components are more likely to persist and succeed. Those who do not are more likely to drop out (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). By focusing on students who persisted, researchers could identify student-based attributes, pre-college or otherwise, which could serve as models/reasoning as to why some students were better able to integrate while others struggled.
Tinto’s theory (1975) and related works (1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2005, 2012; Tinto & Pusser, 2006) are well-known and widely respected in the area of student retention across a variety of institutions and student populations in higher education (Braxton, 2000, Grayson & Grayson, 2003, Harvey-Smith, 2002; Jenson, 2011; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). At the same time, Tinto’s theory and related works have been criticized for being tested only with campus-based, traditional-AGED, and non-diverSE populations (Braxton, 2000; Grayson & Grayson, 2003; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2004) as well as for focusing on retention (institutional actions) as opposed to persistence (student actions) (Jensen, 2011). Important to this research study is the notion that as well-respected as Tinto’s works have become, his works largely overlook a discourse on student success from the point of view of the online, adult learner. As such, Tinto’s works can be seen as extremely useful as a well-respected, logical starting point for developing a model of student persistence for online, adult learners, but not necessarily as generalizable to all student groups.

Below is a diagram that gives visual representation of Tinto’s original model:
(Tinto, 1975, p.114)

**Student Persistence Theories Focused on Online and/or Adult Learners**

Tinto’s theory has withstood the test of time and numerous analyses. His theory has driven policy and practice at countless institutions in hopes of retaining, and ultimately graduating, scores of students. Nonetheless, Tinto’s theory is also criticized as focused on traditional-aged students. The table below illustrates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tinto’s theory as seen as driving policy and practice at institutions</th>
<th>Tinto’s works as criticized for its traditional-student, campus-based focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Tinto’s Theory as Driving Policy/Practice Compared with Criticism of Tinto’s Traditional-Student Focus*
In 1975, this worked well because the overwhelming majority of college students were traditional-aged students. As the demographics of students changed, however (United States Department of Education, 2005, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016), it became important to look to other theorists for examination of how increasing student groups (community college entrants, adult learner students, online students) could best persist and succeed. Thus, by incorporating other theorists, specifically those who analyzed attributes of the researcher’s student group in this study the researcher was able to collect discussion and analysis of each attribute of this particular student group.

**Kember’s Model of Student Progress**

Kember (1995) presented a model for student persistence that focused on adult learners taking distance-learning coursework (Stavredes & Herder, 2014). Kember was well-aware of Tinto’s work and influence in the area of sociological factors to student persistence as well as its limitations specifically with respect to being based on traditional-aged, full-time students. Rather than discount Tinto, however, Kember instead acknowledged the influence and importance of Tinto’s model towards creating his (Kember’s) own model of student persistence. In Kember’s words:
It is important that researchers find a model to be of value in interpreting their findings. Therefore, the Tinto model would appear to be the best starting point for a model of persistence applicable to open learning and distance education courses.

The model in this book draws heavily upon constructs developed by Tinto in his original model of persistence (1975) and in his subsequent theoretical development of the work (1987). (Kember, 1995, p. 35-36)

Tinto’s theory can serve as a solid baseline for Kember’s own work, but it does not provide complete scaffolding. Tinto focused on traditional-aged, campus-based students (McGivney, 2009). Kember indicated that Tinto’s model needed to be significantly revised to factor in influences outside of academia including those more prevalent to distance-learning, adult learners – family obligations, full-time employment, and other social-based commitments (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1995; Lint, 2013; McGivney, 2009). What makes Kember’s model different is its focus on the adult student, distance-learner and factors specific to this group that affect student persistence. In addition, it takes into account that adult-learner, part-time students on average take much longer to complete their degree than their traditional-aged counterparts (Woodley, de Lange, & Tanewski, 2001).

Kember’s model asserts that adult learner, online students have several noteworthy characteristics upon entry into college/university life – family characteristics, full-time employment status, educational background, and social integration (Kember, 1995). These entry characteristics are very important, for they both serve as a starting point for the path a student will follow and as a heavy influence with respect to which path is ultimately followed. Specifically, these characteristics tend to lead students down one of two paths or tracks (Kember,
Those students having more favorable/positive situations tend to move down a positive path (persistence) – by integrating both academically and socially. Those students having more unfavorable/challenging situations tend to move down a negative path (attrition) – by experiencing trouble academically and socially (Kember, 1995; McGivney, 2009). For Kember, the better the social and academic integration on the part of the student (which is influenced by a student’s starting point), the better the student’s chance for persistence and success. More favorable entry characteristics improve the odds that the student will gravitate to higher levels of social and academic integration, which in turn translates to improved odds of persistence and success.

**Bean and Metzner**

Not unlike Kember, Bean and Metzner (1985) also relied heavily on the works of Tinto (Holst, 2007; Sanders, 2008). Like Tinto, Bean and Metzner posited the academic and social integration of the student into college/university experiences improves student persistence/success (Myran, 2009). Unlike Tinto, however, Bean and Metzner focused on the adult, part-time learner (Sanders, 2008), whom they defined as aged twenty-five or older, taking courses part-time, commuting to campus, not predominantly influenced by the social environment of the college/university attended, and focused on course-taking or earning a credential (Bean & Metzner, 1984; McGivney, 2009). The student’s ultimate decision to persist or drop-out relied on four factors:

- academic performance measured by grade point average, intent to leave
- background/defining variables – age, gender, enrollment status, ethnicity, high school performance
• residence and educational goals
• environmental variables – finances, family responsibilities, hours of employment, opportunity to transfer, and outside encouragement

(Bean & Metzner, 1985; Holst, 2007; McGivney, 2009)

Bean and Metzner did find that academic integration was important for this population as it pertained to persistence/success (Sanders, 2008). However, their main finding was that non-traditional aged students seemed to be more influenced by external environmental factors in comparison to their traditional-aged counterparts (Holst, 2007; McGivney, 2009; Sanders, 2008).

Billings

Billings (1988), like other student persistence theorists, relied heavily on Tinto’s theory. Billings was additionally influenced by Bean and Metzner’s model. However, her model of student persistence differed in that it focused on the distance-learner (McGivney, 2009). A student’s intent to complete a course or program (i.e. motivation) was found to be an important factor in persistence (Stavredes & Herder, 2014). Moreover, Billings’ model factored in family and employment status as variables, something missing in Tinto’s or Bean and Metzner’s models (McGivney, 2009). Billings found that students who submitted assignments early had greater rates of persistence than students who submitted assignments at the very end of the course. Students with higher overall grade point averages, familiarity with the online format, and fellow student support also tended to persist at a greater rate as well (McGivney, 2009; Stavredes & Herder, 2014). In addition, Billings found when students were successful in a course, they tended to be more likely to persist in future courses (Stavredes & Herder, 2014). To that,
Billings found that one single factor was not necessarily critical to student persistence, but rather a series of factors determined if a student would persist or drop-out (McGivney, 2009). The more successes a student had in online courses, the better their chance of persisting/succeeding overall (Stavredes & Herder, 2014).

**Other Noteworthy Theorists**

Although facing much the same criticisms as Tinto with respect to having a traditional-aged, campus-centered focus (McGivney, 2009), Astin (1977, 1984, 1985) and Milem and Berger (1997) presented important theories, both of which recognized Tinto’s student integration theory as well as departed from it as a means of adding to the discourse of student persistence and success. Specifically, these theorists are noteworthy for the research study in that they look at student persistence from a success point of view as opposed to why students drop-out. In addition, these theorists looked at what students can actively do to promote their own success as opposed to what outside factors influence drop-out/failure (Milem & Berger, 1997).

**Astin’s Theory of Involvement**

Astin (1977, 1984, 1985) developed a theory of involvement that has received considerable attention in the area of promoting student engagement and success. His theory essentially states that the more involved a student is with a higher education institution, the more likely the student will persist/succeed at that institution (Berger & Milem, 1997, 1999; Berger & Lyons, 2005; McGivney, 2009; Milem & Berger, 1997). This involvement according to Astin includes both academic and social aspects of the higher education experience. In Astin’s (1984) words:
Quite simply, student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. Thus, a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. (Astin, 1984, p. 297)

The student plays a critical role in his/her persistence/success within the collegiate experience. This can manifest itself both directly with students and the ways they can self-motivate to become more involved as well as indirect ways institutions can provide opportunities for more student involvement. Astin identified five truths to explain involvement:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination).

2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.

3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student’s involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.

5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement (Astin, 1984, p. 519).

Astin’s theory is different from others in that it does not claim to use Tinto as a foundation (McGivney, 2009). Tinto (and many who used his work as a foundation) focused on student perceptions and influences upon a student (Tinto, 1975, 1993), whereas Astin looked at student behavior as a focus for his theory (McGivney, 2009; Milem & Berger, 1997). Astin placed great importance on the level of student involvement as a prime driving factor if a student would persist or not, whereas others looked at a host of environmental factors and student perceptions as driving factors (Berger & Milem, 1999; Milem & Berger, 1997; McGivney, 2009). This is important because it placed an emphasis on the student as controlling their persistence/success as opposed to other factors influencing drop-out/failure, such as institutional factors. That is, Astin looked at what a student can do as opposed to what happens to/influences a student as a result of what institutions attempt to accomplish (Milem & Berger, 1997).

**Milem and Berger**

Milem and Berger’s student persistence model (1997) presents itself as a hybrid of Tinto’s academic integration theory and Astin’s involvement theory (McGivney, 2009). Milem and Berger recognized that student perceptions of student integration and their actual involvement with the institution and its collegiate experience are factors in the student’s
persistence/success (Berger & Milem, 1999; McGivney, 2009). By noting both direct and indirect effects, Milem and Berger indicated that a more complete picture could be gleaned with respect to explaining student persistence and student persistence factors (Berger & Milem, 1999; Milem & Berger, 1997). They found that students were more likely to persist at an institution if their value/belief systems aligned well with the institution’s mission and core values (McGivney, 2009). Although Milem and Berger faced similar criticism as Tinto with respect to their research using a traditional-aged, residential population (McGivney, 2009), their work is noteworthy in that they looked at direct (student involvement) and indirect (institutional effect) factors regarding student outcomes as they relate to persistence and success (McGivney, 2009; Reason, 2009).

Summary

In summary, a review of and respect for the work of Vincent Tinto is important as a conceptual framework to identify student persistence and success. Tinto’s model is widely referenced as well as heavily drawn-upon as a foundation on which many other student persistence theorists build their own theories (Braxton, 2000, Grayson & Grayson, 2003, Harvey-Smith, 2002; Jenson, 2011; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008, McGivney, 2009). However, the works of Kember (1995) and Astin (1984) in specific present a more precise logical lens and resource to identify student persistence and success as they pertain to this study, as they focus on online, adult learners and/or from the perspective of how student engagement can influence student persistence/success. Using these specific theories and models as a conceptual framework allowed the researcher to anchor the study within the scope of research on student persistence and success. The use of this conceptual
framework also informed the research questions, served as a lens with which to view and discuss the research findings, and provided scaffolding/structure in conjunction with understanding/explaining how participants in this study found persistence and success.
Chapter Three: Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review serves as “the systematic identification, location, and analysis of documents containing information pertaining to a research problem” (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012, p. G-4). Specifically, it is a gathering and evaluation or assessment of a selection of peer-reviewed articles, papers, and textbooks that relates to the research question (Butin, 2010; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). At the same time, the literature review serves as validation, or “simply put, your chance to make sure that you are not wasting your time” (Butin, 2010, p. 63). The literature review verifies if others have already researched and published the exact same research question the researcher posed, or if someone framed the researcher’s research question in a different way, or struggled with any specific topics the researcher addressed. It can expose gaps in the researcher’s own research, or in the research of others (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). It can also inspire the researcher to look at their own research question in different ways, possibly to the point of amending the research question or moving the research forward but also down a different path.

A plethora of literature exists with respect to explaining why students drop-out and fail. More specifically, many articles relate to the programs/interventions that can be made to combat attrition/drop-out. However, very little research literature exists from the perspective of explaining why students succeed and what programs/interventions can be made to better support students on their roads to success. Most can only be found in pieces if at all within discussion about retention programs. The table below illustrates.
### Table 3

**Breakdown of Literature Comparing Negative Factors to Positive Factors Regarding Student Progress**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature explaining why students drop-out/fail</th>
<th>Literature related to combating drop-out</th>
<th>Literature exploring why students succeed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
This literature review covers specific areas - community college student persistence, student engagement, innovation in higher education, baccalaureate attainment, adult learner support, and online student support – the literature review is organized around a very specific student group - online, adult baccalaureate-seekers who began their studies at the community college level and succeeded in completing their baccalaureate.

**Contemporary Challenges in Higher Education**

Higher education institutions have long been known as places of academic freedom and places of discovery (Kaplan & Lee, 2006), where a combination of the best and brightest minds of old (professoriate) as well as the best and brightest minds of the future (students) meet to solve the problems of the world (Porter, 2002). Institutions of higher education improve the lives of others, both directly and indirectly, as well as improve the society in which they live. Countries with highly educated students additionally are more productive (as measured by Gross National Product) than countries whose citizens are less-educated (Brint, 2006).

Higher education institutions are additionally in part built to be incubators for both creating bold, fresh, new ideas as well as to improve existing systems, philosophical thought, and technology apparatuses (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005). This includes an environment of freedom of thought, experimenting with new ways of thinking at existing challenges, and supporting new research and inquiry. At the same time, higher education institutions need to continue to encourage free-thinking and out-of-the-box ideas and projects so the next best
invention or process can be explored and implemented (Davidson & Goldberg, 2009; Menard, 2010). Via a process of continuous innovations, reaching/bringing together a larger pool of students, and improving the quality of instruction, higher education institutions can have a greater, positive impact on society (Brint, 2006; Porter, 2002).

Higher education institutions also face a number of challenges - the internationalization of colleges and universities in the face of globalization (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Kerr, 1994), the homogenization of colleges/universities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), academic freedom versus common standards for higher education (Gajda, 2009; Kaplan & Lee, 2006), the preservation of the guiding principles of the past (Kerr, 1994, Menard, 2010) versus a strong push for constant change/innovation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009), and the preservation of ethics and standards versus financial pressures and opportunity for individual gain (Gajda, 2009). Reacting to changing demographics and shifting market needs adds an additional dimension in the face of increased competition for students as well as increased expectations of students-as-consumers (Gajda, 2009; Menard, 2010).

A change in student demographics concurrent with increased pressures – education, socioeconomic, and technology-driven – put upon students (Brint, 2006; Gajda, 2009) has in turn driven higher education institutions to find alternate means of accommodating student education needs. In addition, competition and student demands have increased pressures for higher education institutions to innovate and at the same time treat students-as-consumers (Gajda, 2009; Menard, 2010). As a result, non-traditional-aged distance learner populations have increased. In an increasingly competitive higher education market, institutions have scrambled to attract and educate older, online student populations (Johnson, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2012). That trend shows no signs of slowing down. Undergraduate non-traditional-
aged undergraduate students will soon outnumber traditional-aged undergraduate students in the United States. In addition, undergraduate online students will exceed undergraduate campus-based students (Johnson, 2013; LaBrie & Gallagher, 2012).

**Growing Student Populations**

**Online/Distance Education Students**

Online/distance education is decades-old (Northeastern University Online, 2012; Stokes, 2011), though significant increases in students and programs are relatively recent (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Conrad & Donaldson, 2009; Parsad & Lewis, 2008; United States Department of Education, 2012). The increase in students over the age of twenty-five (United States Department of Education, 2012), the added demands of the workforce, market demands, convenience (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Kolowich, 2011; LaBrie & Gallagher, 2012; Park, 2009; Parsad & Lewis, 2008), and technological advances (Park, 2009) can all be attributed to the rapid increase in online learning. Online learning can provide worldwide access for students who otherwise could not attend school (LaBrie & Gallagher, 2012). Moreover, it can literally bring together people from around the world quickly and conveniently (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; LaBrie & Gallagher, 2012) for the purpose of increasing their knowledge base and level of expertise.

Yet, issues of quality have plagued online learning for years (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Dixson, 2010; Kolowich, 2011; Park, 2009; Richardson, Long, & Woodley, 2003; Shelton, 2010). In addition, the needs of online students have been largely ignored by higher education leaders and administrators (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Bundy, 2004; Hansman, 2001). Many leaders and administrators have failed to understand just how online students differ from campus-based
students (Coates, 2007; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Dixson, 2010; Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008). For example, without a physical campus to attend and lacking face-to-face interaction, online learners can feel disconnection, isolation, and marginalization (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Bundy, 2004; Hansman, 2001). Campus-based resources and programs may seem irrelevant to online learners (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Venter, 2003). Moreover, online learning can feel rather faceless and personality-less, contributing to feelings of isolation and marginalization on the part of students (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Education Advisory Board, 2015; Noel-Levitz, 2015).

Non-Traditional-Aged Learners in Higher Education

Much the same can be said with respect to non-traditional-aged students (those over the age of twenty-five), commonly referred to as adult learners (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011; United States Department of Education, 2012, 2014, 2016). Not many institutions meaningfully differentiate between practices for engaging traditional-aged students and engaging non-traditional-aged students (Bundy, 2004; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Education Advisory Board, 2015; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Hansman, 2001; Noel-Levitz, 2015; Pappas & Jerman, 2004; Park, 2009; Venter, 2003). Without good models of effective practice for engaging and serving adult learners, colleges and universities will continue to struggle to engage and educate them (Aslanian, 2001; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Hansman, 2004; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Kasworm, 2008; Noel-Levitz, 2015; Park, 2009; Venter, 2003). This is particularly troubling, considering that adult learners are no longer a small slice of the higher education student body. In fact, the overall number of adult students is close to that of their

**Adult Learners Who Are Also Online Learners**

Looking specifically at this combination group (adult learners who are also participating in online or distance education programs), a paradox is readily apparent. On one hand, this group represents a combination of the fastest-growing groups of higher education students in the United States (Johnson, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2012). This combination group is also often a disconnected/marginalized group of students in higher education (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Hansman, 2001; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Kasworm, 2008; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Venter, 2003). Moreover, a prolonged disengagement of this critical, growing combination group negatively affects student success and persistence, including but not limited to increased risk of drop-out (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011; Park, 2009; Shelton, 2010). Statistically speaking, this group is the least likely to persist and graduate (Pearson, Widen, & Jordan, 2015). As defined and widely accepted by many institutions, including community colleges, “Degree completion programs define success as graduation” (Education Advisory Board, 2015, p. 8). As a result, identification of the distinct experiences, needs, and concerns of online, adult learners is necessary as a critical step towards better learning from and engaging these students, thereby focusing on their academic persistence and success.

**Online, Adult Learners in Higher Education**

**Characteristics of Online Learners**
Online students are of various ages, academic abilities, and backgrounds. Their reasons for being online learners can also vary greatly (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Gallimore, 2017; Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Shelton, 2010; Stokes, 2011). Many online students, while new to the online learning experience, have taken coursework in the past, whether it was as a traditional-aged or non-traditional-aged student (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001; Stokes, 2011). These learners tend to be technology-savvy and independent learners (Calvin & Freeburg, 2010) who tend to be self-starters and open to the notion of online learning as a valid education option (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Shelton, 2010; Stokes, 2011).

Given a wide range of student demographics, coupled with growing numbers of online students, trends and characteristics do have the potential to shift and change. For example, a recent Noel-Levitz (2011) three-year, nearly one-hundred-thousand-student study covering undergraduate and graduate programs at over one hundred institutions revealed some trends/characteristics of online learners. Their study determined:

- A majority of online learners were Caucasian females enrolled in full-time equivalent course loads.
- A majority of students were studying at the undergraduate level and employed full-time while taking coursework.
- A majority of students were new to the online learning experience.
- A majority of students wished to complete their degree online only.
- A near-majority of students had a goal of graduate or doctoral study.
The Noel-Levitz study supports other literature regarding historically popular characteristics of online learners (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001; Shelton, 2010; Stokes, 2011). As can be imagined, some characteristics have changed in the last five-plus years since the 2011 study (Noel-Levitz, 2015). Online learners currently include widely diverse populations of students, both incoming new and returning students as well as traditional-aged and adult learner students (United States Department of Education, 2014, 2016; Gallimore, 2017; Noel-Levitz, 2015). Yet, at the same time, characteristics have also in large part remained remarkably similar over a long period of time.

Many online students succeed, while others seem to struggle. Although a number of outside factors can be attributed to success and failure in general, some factors can be particularly important to the success of online learners. First and foremost, successful online learners need to be technologically-savvy, or at the very least, not technologically-challenged (Calvin & Freeburg, 2010). While this seems fairly intuitive, colleges and universities have been surprised to find out just how many online learners are underprepared for the online learning experience (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Calvin & Freeburg, 2010; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Stokes, 2011). Second, successful online learners need to be self-motivated, independent learners. While online learning affords an incredible amount of flexibility, at the same time there often exists very little synchronous contact with instructors (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, Stokes, 2011). For students accustomed to receiving responses from instructors as soon as they are finished asking them in the classroom, waiting twenty-four to forty-eight hours or more can be a difficult adjustment (Conrad & Donaldson, 2009; Shelton, 2010; Stokes, 2011). Third, successful online learners
need strong reading and writing skills. Instead of speaking up in class, online learners spend more time writing their thoughts down in discussion boards as well as reading the thoughts of others on those boards (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Stokes, 2011). Finally, successful online learners need to be self-motivated/self-disciplined. This includes good time management, good problem-solving skills (on their own), and being committed to their studies. Moreover, they need to be self-confident (i.e. not afraid to ask questions), and they need to have faith in an online experience as academically fulfilling as an on-ground experience (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008). The literature referenced in this section did not differentiate among traditional-aged and non-traditional-aged students, nor first-time online learners and those who studied online previously.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

Adult learners in general, and those who are community college transfers in specific, have a wealth of experiences – work and life - to share in the classroom (Zacharakis, Steichen, de Sabates, & Tanewski, 2011). While traditional-aged students might have some similar experiences, the depth and breadth of these experiences are generally thinner than their adult learner counterparts (Aslanian, 2001; Bundy, 2004; Kasworm, Sandman, & Sissel, 2000; Ritt, 2008; Zacharakis, Steichen, de Sabates, & Tanewski, 2011), both at four-year institutions and at community colleges (Bundy, 2004; Ritt, 2008). Many adult learners are more than twice the age of their traditional-aged counterparts. Given a larger pool of experiences from just a time point alone, adult students are more equipped to share these experiences in the classroom (Bundy, 2004; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000; Ross-Gordon, 2011;
Zacharakis, Steichen, de Sabates, & Tanewski, 2011). Adult learners also tend to pursue academic credit for work/life experience or credits from prior higher education institutions (Aslanian, 2001; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010). Adult learners typically work full-time and have families, meaning they typically have more life obligations than their traditional-aged counterparts (Aslanian, 2001; Bundy, 2004; Gallimore, 2017; Ross-Gordon, 2011). As a result, the typical adult learner has specific goals in mind when selecting an institution, choosing a major, and completing a degree path. Adult learners change their majors infrequently but will change institutions when they feel they are not getting enough value at their current institution. Additionally, adult learners want clearly-defined course requirements, career-relevant coursework, and quick, clear paths towards completing their degrees (Aslanian, 2001; Bundy, 2004; Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010; Wlodowski, 2003; Zacharakis, Steichen, de Sabates, & Tanewski, 2011).

Community college-based students, especially those above the age of twenty-five, face a number of academic and financial challenges upon entry to a four-year institution (Bundy, 2004; Calvin & Freeburg, 2010; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Kerr, 1994). In addition, confidence can be an issue, as can feelings of isolation or marginalization (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Hansman, 2001; Kasworm, 2008; Venter, 2003). Some are in need of remedial coursework, additional resources for academic success, or other academic support systems to help ease the transition as well as assist them along the way (Hansman, 2001; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012; Pappas & Jerman, 2004; Patterson, 2008). This is especially true at the beginning, i.e., upon entry for adult learners. Because many have been away from college-level coursework for many years, tasks rather simple for traditional-aged students like utilizing a college/university library, reading a syllabus, or forming study groups can be a challenge for adult learners.
(Gallimore, 2017; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). In addition, a number of institutional resources, such as financial aid, registrar, advising, and student clubs/organizations are generally tailored for full-time, traditional-aged students (Bundy, 2004; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012), further contributing to feelings of disconnection or isolation for the non-traditional-aged student. Community college students who transition as adult learners at four-year institutions can feel additional isolation, especially as they continue their studies online. Here, they are doubly isolated – by age and by setting.

**Unique Needs of Adult, Online Learners**

Feelings of isolation and marginalization are primary obstacles faced by some adult, online learners (Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Venter, 2003). Sometimes, this is simply a product of the particular institution itself across all student populations. Institutions that overlook one population of students generally overlook other populations as well. That is, “If an institution does a poor job of helping full-time, first-time students succeed, what kind of job does it do for adult students or distance learning students?” (Pearson, Widen, & Jordan, 2015, p.5). Thus, it is important for institutions to overlook *no one* during the process of educating its students. This may and should involve treating different populations differently at times to assure all populations are given the most opportunities to succeed. To that, “Adult student degree completion requires different strategies than those for full-time traditionals living on campus (who are only a small share of the higher ed population today).” (Pearson, Widen, & Jordan, 2015, p. 7).

Thus, feeling a part of a campus community may be an important need for adult, online learners. Affinity/community offers a distinct connection towards student engagement (Gallimore, 2017; Harper & Quaye, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012),
which could work well to dissolve feelings of isolation or marginalization. Asynchronous tools such as discussion boards, water coolers, group projects, video chat/audio chat, and online classroom-based opportunities can help to alleviate some feelings of isolation or marginalization in an asynchronous online environment. These tools and venues offer a means for adult, online learners to share their experiences and collaborate with fellow students in a collegial manner (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011). This helps to validate and value the experiences of adult learners and can serve as building blocks to other collaborative experiences, such as study groups and social groups (Bundy, 2004; Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001; Noel-Levitz, 2011). Collaborative, collegial opportunities offered electronically inside and outside an online classroom setting can alleviate some of the negatives that isolation and/or marginalization can bring forth (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Venter, 2003).

Online, adult learners have needs common to all students – academic advising, financial aid advising, career services, library services, information technology support, counseling services, disability resource services, and other student-based services (Gallimore, 2017). However, delivery and scope of these services may need to look and feel very different from campus-based and/or traditional student-based services in order for the online, adult learner to feel comfortable using them (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Coates, 2007). As a result, not only must the services be easily accessible, but the online, adult learner must be aware of the services and be encouraged to use them. Orientation programs and other outreach events are necessary in such a way that online, adult learners find it comfortable to access them. To meet these student needs, institutions should embrace a culture of treating all categories of students as important. Prompt feedback, good listening skills, an understanding of the needs and goals of online, adult
learners, and an embracing of online, adult learners as bringing value to the institution as a whole are all important markers towards meeting adult, online student needs (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Bundy, 2004; Coates, 2007; Venter, 2003).

Most online, adult learners have specific, career-related goals that necessitate their pursuit of a degree or credential (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Davidson & Goldberg, 2009; Gallimore, 2017; Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel 2000; Maehl, 2000; Stokes, 2011). As a result, though common with all types of students, online, adult learners particularly desire the learning experience to personally align with their career-related, learning goals. That is, lessons, assignments, examinations, and other coursework responsibilities need to exemplify real-world examples and applications as much as possible for adult, online students. Therefore, instructors who value contributions from students in the form of personal experiences give these students a greater chance at feeling the learning process is more personal and career-relevant (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Bundy, 2004; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Davidson & Goldberg, 2009; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Maehl, 2000; Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Pappas & Jerman, 2004; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008; Shelton, 2010). This can be achieved through instructional methodologies such as case studies, podcasts/presentations by leaders in that subject, work-application scenarios, jurisprudential inquiry, and role-playing scenarios. In other words, though all student populations need aspects of theory and practice (i.e. real-world applications) as part of a transformative learning experience, online, adult learners seem to want to prioritize practice over theory more than other student populations (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Bundy, 2004; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Davidson & Goldberg, 2009; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Maehl, 2000; Mehrotra, Hollister, &
Factors Promoting Student Success

Student Engagement

Defining student engagement. At its very basic core, student engagement aims to connect students to the institution (Gallimore, 2017; Harper & Quaye, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). In traditional, on-campus settings, this can take the form of student-faculty interaction or student involvement with other students via study groups or clubs and organizations, campus events, or services aimed at assisting students (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Student engagement serves as a retention effort for institutions and can also be seen as beneficial to student persistence and success (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012) meant to benefit all students (Bahr, 2008; Bers, 2008; Coates, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Titus, 2004; Venezia & Krist, 2005). For example, students may encounter questions of identity based on ethnicity, religion, country of origin, language, sexual orientation or disability, and/or facing for the first time a community different from that of their home or community (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

To meet these challenges, a host of best practices emerge that engage the whole student and create a sense of belonging and community on campus. Some may be intrusive – for example requiring students to attend an orientation session, while others may be passive – for
example having an orientation session as optional. Some may include all student groups, while others might focus on a specific student group. Some may be departmental, while others can be college/university wide. From bridge programs to multicultural experiences, targeted initiatives and dedicated resources can help students build their own levels of engagement. By identifying actions tied to specific engagement metrics of the National Survey of Student Engagement (2012), overall engagement, and therefore persistence, should increase among the student body (Coates, 2007; Gallimore, 2017; Harper & Quaye, 2009).

**Significance of improving student engagement.** Colleges and universities have long been havens for teaching and learning, where students and faculty learn, discover, and grow for individual and societal benefit (Brint, 2006). Student engagement only augments these attributes and goals (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). At the same time, most institutions need to adhere to budgets or otherwise be efficient financially (Menard, 2010). For institutions, improving student engagement also makes good financial sense. Engaged students have a higher rate of persistence and success, leading to better student retention rates (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). Persisting students continue to pay tuition whereas drop-outs do not. In addition, successful students translate into alumni and, ultimately, alumni giving (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). And, since engaged students are more likely to be happy with their institution as well as their college experience at that institution, chances are they will also be more likely to be active alumni – financially and otherwise (i.e. volunteerism). That is, engaged students, more likely to be happy, will also tend to more likely be better ambassadors to the institution. Improved student engagement can benefit student satisfaction, persistence, and success in the form of improved grades and fewer failed/withdrawn grades (Harper & Quaye, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). Building connections with the
college/university additionally allows students a way to “value the positive impact in their tuition and time spent toward degree.” (Pearson, Widen, & Jordan, 2015). Thus, a plan that includes improving student engagement makes good business sense (Menard, 2010; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). Moreover, working with students to understand what they need to be engaged (instead of assuming administrators know without student input) is critical to meeting their needs (Gallimore, 2017).

For students, changes in technology, work roles, and market demands result in changing economic and education goals. As a consequence, older students might not necessarily want to go back to school, but are called upon to continue to be lifelong learners as a means of adapting to altered professional demands. At the same time, adult learners can experience different levels of engagement when they rate these learning experiences compared to their traditional-aged peers (Coates, 2007; Richardson, Long, & Woodley, 2003). This can be influenced by work/life demands, institutional bias towards traditional-aged students, gaps in age, and gaps in educational goals. Adult learners can become poorly engaged in the institution as a result. Poor engagement leads to marginalization, isolation, and ultimately disconnection (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Venter, 2003). Concurrently, poor student engagement for online learners leads to a lack of identity/affiliation with the institution. Along with a perceived or real lack of institutional commitment (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Venter, 2003), higher levels of student attrition can occur (Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011). To reach a mutually-desirable goal of increased student retention by the institution and persistence/success by the student, improved engagement practices are necessary to support adult, online learners (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Venter, 2003).
Need for improved practices for student engagement. Research suggests improved practices for student engagement are not the responsibility of a single person or department, but rather should be cross-departmental, transformative, and continuous (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Aw, Poole, & Baker, 2011; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Venter, 2003). The National Survey of Student Engagement (2012) offers a number of general benchmarks towards effective student engagement. First and foremost, they suggest academic experience must have value to students. Students need to feel challenged in order to want to participate in the academic experience (Harper & Quaye, 2009). This concept is a long-standing one, as evidenced in the works of Paulo Freire (1970): “Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to the challenge” (p. 64). This means the education experience must be fulfilling, a result of challenging yet rewarding activities of value (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Therefore, a strong connection between the academic experience and value to the student can be seen as a long-standing education goal (Freire, 1970, Harper & Quaye, 2009).

Second, the National Survey of Student Engagement (2012) suggests the learning environment needs to be collaborative. That is, student-faculty interaction is important (Freire, 1970; Harper & Quaye, 2009). Having only the professor speak and the students listen makes for an incomplete learning experience. The banking concept of education according to Freire (1970) “is passive, domesticating, and serves to “annul the students’ creative power” (p.59). In contrast, Freire’s humanist concept entails that “efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. [His] efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in men and their creative power. To achieve this, [he] must be a partner of the students and his relations with them.” (p. 60). Teaching (and learning) must be
active and must involve faculty and students questioning, discovering, learning, and growing together via action: “Through dialogue… they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 63). In other words, collaboration can be seen as essential for educator and educated alike.

Third, they suggest students, in order to be successful, generally need to feel supported by faculty and staff. This entails more than words or providing resources or offering support. Actions must be proactive and take place throughout the school year, not just at an orientation event at the beginning (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Departments must be equipped and willing to reach out to students. Prompt and meaningful responsiveness are necessary to affirm student needs as valid and important. Faculty can encourage collaborative learning experiences. Staff can encourage participation through interactive events and workshops. Both can encourage questions and inquiries as desired, not thought of as an inconvenience. In general, students are more likely to persist and succeed when their beliefs and value systems align with that institution, and in specific with that institution’s mission and core values (Berger & Milem, 1999; Milem & Berger, 1997; McGivney, 2009). That is, students need to feel in constant touch with their institutions as part of their persistence efforts.

Other Factors Promoting Student Success

Society. A society that prioritizes education at the highest level can be seen as an inspiration to students who want to pursue and complete a degree program. While there can be negative pressures as well – i.e. looking down upon those who don’t choose a college path right out of high school or who feel higher education is unimportant – just the reward alone of a promise of a better-paying job or a more interesting career can make a difference in an individual’s decision-making process to pursue a degree (Education Advisory Board, 2015;
There exists a direct correlation between earning a degree and higher earning potential (Brint, 2006; Gajda, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012; United States Department of Education, 2014), and many careers require a college education just to apply (Brint, 2006; Gajda, 2009). Thus, there are long-term financial benefits to going to college/completing a degree (Brint, 2006; Education Advisory Board, 2015; Gajda, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012; Noel-Levitz, 2015; United States Department of Education, 2014). Also, it is widely acceptable to continue one’s education after high school for individuals to evolve into more productive, socially conscious individuals (Brint, 2006; Education Advisory Board, 2015). Building a smarter, more socially aware society is a positive for many (Brint, 2006; Noel-Levitz, 2011, 2015), and many feel having the highest number of their citizens as possible earn a degree is a clear path towards those goals (Brint, 2006; Porter, 2002). Finally, the sheer number of students affected is significant, as the population of adult learner, online students is increasing and rivals traditional-aged counterpart populations (Johnson, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2011, 2014, 2016). As a result, for financial and society-based reasons, pursuing and completing a degree program can be seen as desirous and necessary.

**Higher education institutions.** Higher education institutions help individual students pursue and complete degree programs. Financial aid can be made available to eligible students who complete paperwork and qualify, defraying the costs of higher education for many years and allowing students who could otherwise not attend enroll quickly into programs citation needed. Scholarships may be available to students of all walks of life, further allowing students the opportunity to attend a college/university. Students who qualify can apply for a variety of
scholarships that could apply to any institution. Academic institutions can also offer scholarships specific to their institution, further incenting students to apply to that institution. Institutions can offer other incentives – credit for work/life experience, work-study opportunities, and other programs, to further defray costs and promote enrollment. Also suggested are programs to promote affordability through second-chance financial incentives such as a scholarship for returning students or a discount on a first course taken (Education Advisory Board, 2015) as well as streamlined procedures with respect to applying for scholarships and/or federal financial aid.

Higher education institutions often augment the learning experience for online, adult learners by promoting student success through several institution-driven initiatives such as hiring and retaining faculty attuned to the specific needs of the adult, online student. First, institutions can retain/hire faculty attuned to the specific needs of the adult, online student. These attributes can include familiarity with technology, responsiveness to increased student inquiry, ability to build syllabi and course outcomes so students of varied learning styles can succeed, flexibility to offer alternate testing methods, an understanding of the different needs of the adult, online student, and skill in providing motivation for student success (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Bundy, 2004; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Davidson & Goldberg, 2009; Dixson, 2010; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Maehl, 2000; Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001; Noel-Levitz, 2011, 2015; Pappas & Jerman, 2004; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008; Shelton, 2010). Second, institutions may create an affinity/connection for students – this can be student-to-fellow students as well as student-to-institution. Especially as a student progresses, students in a particular major should be connecting with one another inside and outside of the classroom. Affinity between the student and the institution, however, can be a little more difficult to attain
without an existing affinity group. An online, adult learner student group sometimes is a critical, first step (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2011, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Instructors putting students to group work can help facilitate this process of connection as well.

Third, the learning experience can be made to be more personal (Bundy, 2004; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Within an online learning environment, a sense of the personality of others is primarily determined by written words via posts and written assignments. In the classroom, one can additionally see and hear others as well as observe non-verbal communication. The posting of pictures, posting a video or audio introduction, or using technology that could enhance the online learning experience and bridge gaps between online and classroom experiences (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2011, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Finally, institutions can attempt to streamline processes and minimize bureaucracy towards lessening student frustration (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Bundy, 2004; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Davidson & Goldberg, 2009; Pappas & Jerman, 2004; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008; Shelton, 2010). The rewards are reciprocal. High rates of student success attracts future students, helps an institution maintain or improve prestige, is profitable, and helps support the betterment of society (Pallas, 2000; Porter, 2002; United States Department of Education, 2012, 2014, 2016). Institutions also directly affect the communities in which they reside (Pallas, 2000; Noel-Levitz, 2011, 2015) – those institutions that foster successful students improve the surrounding community as well.

**Employers.** Employers of students, according to the literature, can also affect student success (Education Advisory Board, 2015; Noel-Levitz, 2011, 2015; Ritt, 2008). Some of this can be purely financial in nature. Tuition reimbursement, the promise of a promotion after a degree is earned, or other opportunities afforded by earning a degree are possibilities for many
employees. Moreover, some employers can offer an individual more flexibility in their work hours or work responsibilities as a means of helping them manage work and schooling. Others can generally encourage from the beginning by supporting an individual to go back to school/continue schooling (Education Advisory Board, 2015). Creating a culture of acceptance is certainly an important factor to consider, notwithstanding financial and career-developing opportunities/doors opened.

**Summation of the Literature on Adult, Online Learners in Higher Education**

Increasingly, higher education institutions are attempting to provide services and opportunities that match characteristics and needs specific to older adult, online learners (Gallimore, 2017; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2011, 2015; Stokes, 2011). This is in response to financial pressures; the demographic of adult learner, online students grows while competition to enroll this adult learner, online student population accelerates (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008). The pressures are also pedagogical, as institutions find that programs and services that work well for traditional-aged, campus-based students do not necessarily work effectively with adult, online learners (Aslanian, 2001; Bundy, 2004; Calvin & Freeburg, 2010; Gallimore, 2017; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Stokes, 2011). The pressures are student-centric also, in that students-as-consumers are demanding higher-quality and career-relevant programs and resources to compensate for an increasingly expensive path towards education goals. In turn, students are more than ever concerned with their own success in higher education given the higher stakes involved (Coates, 2007; Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000; Shelton, 2010). Finally, these pressures are social, as online, adult learners can easily feel marginalized from an institution unless that institution makes deliberate, sustained efforts to engage them and students are willing
to want to succeed (Coates, 2007; Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011; Venter, 2003). For some student populations (such as non-traditional students, online students, community college students), feelings and pressures of isolation, lack of institutional support, and mis-alignment with pedagogical methods are ever-present. Student engagement opportunities – as well as other factors such as society itself, institutions, faculty, and employers - can greatly improve the chances a student will develop affinity with their institution and ultimately, persist and succeed. Most importantly, these opportunities need to be created as a result of seeking student input. For institutions to be successful in this regard “optimizing success for non-traditional students in online degree programs means not just researching the most proven student support services techniques but also asking for student input” (Gallimore, 2017, p. 1).
Chapter Four: Methodology

Introduction

The methodology of a researcher is important both to gather pertinent information for a study as well as to ultimately analyze the data gained. This way, a researcher can discover new information or better understand existing information (Creswell, 2007, 2009). There are many research methods a researcher can choose. It is a way to organize information and data. Depending upon the researcher’s study, certain research methods lend themselves well or not-so-well to a particular study. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to choose an appropriate research method so an organized, informative study and discourse can take place (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

The method chosen for this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative approach that is experiential in nature, aimed at exploring how participants make sense of an aspect of their world as it was experienced by them. The examination of their world is detailed and personal, meaning that IPA is concerned with an individual’s perception of an object or event based upon their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Moreover, the researcher, using IPA, discerns meaning from an experience or event by listening, recording, and interpreting the experiences and stories as told by a participant or participants of that experience or event (Willis, 2007). Put more simply, IPA is focused on understanding lived experiences specifically through examining how a participant or participants make sense out of their lived experiences (Langdridge, 2007). IPA is phenomenological; it incorporates a process in which the individual makes detailed recollections and interpretations of their own unique lived
experiences of a phenomenon - an object or event - and the researcher makes an analysis of those unique, lived experiences. Moreover, IPA seeks to get as close as possible to those lived experiences through detailed recollection and analysis (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). That is, the IPA process is also interpretative in nature, both from the perspective of the researcher and the researched.

**Origins of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis - Husserl**

The roots of IPA lie in phenomenology, a philosophical approach aimed at investigating perceptions of an experience through the eyes/narration of a participant or participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012; Willis, 2007). Origins of IPA can be traced to Edmund Husserl (Simmons & Benson, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012), who “was particularly interested in finding a means by which someone might come to accurately know their own (italics in original) experience of a given phenomenon” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p.12). Moreover, through a thorough study of the experience, Husserl sought to find ways those individuals could “identify the essential (italics in original) qualities of that experience” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 12). For Husserl, it was not merely a recollection of the experience, but rather a deeper reflection of the essence of that experience. As such, this experience would be phenomenological since it relates to the essence of the experience for that individual.

**Other Major Phenomenological Thinkers**

Several other philosophers can be considered as key thinkers towards the development of IPA. Martin Heidegger was actually a student of Husserl (Crowell, 1990; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012) who acknowledged Husserl’s work as significant and influential. At the same time, Heidegger’s thoughts diverged from Husserl’s in that Heidegger sought to be less abstract
and instead place more emphasis on the actual. Heidegger “questioned the possibility of any knowledge outside of an interpretative stance, whilst grounding this stance in the lived world” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 16). However, this is not so much of a rejection of Husserl’s idealistic stance, but rather a transcending or deepening of it by grounding it to the real, lived experience of others (Crowell, 1990). As a result, though Heidegger was “concerned with the conceptual basis of existence, this is from a deliberately worldly perspective” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 16, italics in original). Through Heidegger’s major work Being in Time (1962), one comes to understand that existence in the world is multi-faceted – as it involves interactions grounded in the real world, self-reflections, and interpretations of those experiences (Crowell, 1990; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, was concerned with understanding how the state of being exists in the lived world, favoring a version of phenomenology in the context of the real world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012) over more abstract notions. However, Merleau-Ponty went further into how the individual perceived the real world. He became concerned with how human beings perceive their relationship with the real world and as being different than other objects, animals, or entities. In Phenomenology and Perception (2012), Merleau-Ponty described perceptual consciousness and how that consciousness is embedded in the real world (Gallagher, 2010; Simmons & Benson, 2013). For Merleau-Ponty, perception is an individual, personal experience. He indicated that “ultimately we can never share entirely the other’s experience, because their experience belongs to their own embodied position in the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 19). An individual’s experience is his or her own, and while there may be some overlap with the experience of others, in the end the experience is unique and central to that individual. The experience is both personal and unique to the individual, possibly never fully understood,
but at the same time not to be overlooked (Simmons & Benson, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Perception and consciousness are embedded in the real world, are a unique, individual experience, and are owned by the individual (Gallagher, 2010).

Jean-Paul Sartre is perhaps most associated with his contributions to the philosophy of existentialism (Sartre, 1984). Sartre’s famous quote “existence before essence” speaks to his thought that humans are constantly in the process of becoming themselves. They exist as developing their sense of themselves, freely acting, living, and interacting with the real world as a process of becoming (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). For Sartre, that means “in order to understand what a person is we have to understand the process by which we constitute ourselves as persons” (Reisman, 2007, p. 1). In addition, for Sartre what is missing from that process is equally important as what we can see/experience. Sartre’s Being and Nothingness (1984) presented examples of the absence of entities as equally as important as what is present when individuals are figuring out the world and their place in it (Reisman, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Sartre’s contribution to IPA can be seen as relating to the context of the lived experience – what is present, not present, or changing (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012).

**Hermeneutics and Idiography - Relationship to IPA**

Hermeneutics is sometimes referred to as the study of interpretation, sometimes the science/theory of interpretation. Originally, hermeneutics was used exclusively to better interpret and understand passages in the Bible (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Hermeneutics over time has expanded to cover a much wider array of texts and experiences (Bagchi, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Hermeneutics has also expanded from text-focus to theory-focus (Bagchi, 2007). Hermeneutics is at the core of phenomenology in that hermeneutics seeks
to uncover the original meaning by the author of a given text (Smith, Flowers, & Larking, 2012) through interpreting that text. Likewise, phenomenological researchers aim to get at the meaning of an individual’s experience through a focus on the actual, grounded, detailed experience of that individual (Langdridge, 2007). Hermeneutics aligns with phenomenology in that the world we know is subjective to how we interpret the world we know (Bagchi, 2007). Just as hermeneutics points back to the author or a text, IPA points back to the experience of the individual. Thus, hermeneutics is important/influential to IPA because IPA “always involves interpretation” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 35) and IPA is concerned with getting back to the things themselves and to how the individual experiences them as the true essence of their meaning (Simmons & Benson, 2013).

The hermeneutic circle is also important in IPA. The hermeneutic circle refers to being able to understand phenomena by comprehending and analyzing the individual parts as well as the whole as interconnected, dependent upon one another. Moreover, an understanding of each piece and whole as they relate to each other is essential if one is to make meaning of the phenomena. Neither the individual parts nor the whole itself can be truly understood without referring to the other (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Finding meaning into the phenomena can begin from any number of entry points, and at different levels. But in the end, all of the circle must be understood to find meaning from it (Martin, 1972). For IPA, a number of linear approaches can be made. Nonetheless, without understanding the circle - any part, the whole, how the whole relates to the parts, or how the parts relate to the whole - a full understanding will fall short (Martin, 1972; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012).

Idiography places focus and emphasis on the particular. Idiography is very much concerned with detail – detail in initial observation, detail in the particular, and detail in depth of
analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). IPA is closely idiographic in that it offers a detailed analysis of an experience or event, and moreover multiple events or points of interest, until a point where the researcher can determine common themes from cross-examining the individual about those analyses (Smith, 2004). That is, IPA focuses on the particular, as does idiography. Not only is there a concern of the particular, but also a concern with the nuances and variations inherent in the particular. As a result, IPA and idiography run together both in a commitment to detail as well as a commitment to understanding how the particular “have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). As a result, IPA, while certainly inductive, interrogative, and interpretative, is also idiographic in nature (Smith, 2004).

**IPA as an Effective Research Methodology**

A researcher conducting a phenomenological study does so for the purpose of exploring both perceptions of and reactions to a particular object or event (phenomenon) (Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). In other words, “IPA is concerned with understanding personal lived experience and thus with exploring persons’ relatedness to, or involvement in, a particular event or process” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 40.). An advantage to selecting IPA as a research methodology was that the researcher came to understand phenomena according to the participants’ perceptions of those phenomena. The researcher was able to enter the world of the participants, including their perceptions, insights, and reactions to the object or event (Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun, 2012). Researchers who employ phenomenology assume there is a commonality between human beings and their perceptions/reactions to an object or event. This commonality of perception is referred to them as essence of experience. By finding these commonalities, researchers search to develop themes
in the data analysis of their study (Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012).

**How an IPA Approach Benefits this Specific Research**

Through the use of IPA for this specific research study, the researcher gained opportunities for “exploring, describing, interpreting, and situating the means by which our participants make sense of their experiences” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 40). This was actualized via the use of semi-structured interviews, allowing the researcher to observe, document, and analyze the experiences and information provided by the participants. Through this research approach, the researcher gained a unique insight into the world and experiences of the participants. From there, the researcher identified the detailed perceptions and reactions of the participants, finding common themes as a result of observing these experiences through the eyes and memory of the participants (Maxwell, 2005; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Whenever and wherever possible, the researcher bracketed, or set aside, personal perceptions and biases. It was important for the researcher to do this so the object or event studied (adult learner, online student success regarding four-year degree completion goals) was seen as clearly as possible through the eyes/experiences of the participants and not those of the researcher. That way, fresh, authentic perspectives emerged, which led to common themes from those perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 2009).

**Site and Participants**

Participants selected for this research study were adult, online four-year aspirants who began at a community college and successfully completed their baccalaureate degrees. This was an important piece to understanding the challenges they experienced, how they navigated
through the challenges, and how they overcame those challenges. The lived experiences of participants who were successful in transitioning from community college to a four-year institution and then completed their baccalaureate degrees online provided data, which could then be analyzed and interpreted. Participants were students who actually did reach their four-year degree goal by graduating in 2016. Specifically, five undergraduate degree completers were chosen. A small sample size in IPA research is a means to “preserve the individuality of each of these in their analyses, rather than collecting data from large samples” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22). In addition, a small sample size in IPA is a means “to reveal something about the experience of each of those individuals” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 3). Researchers can benefit from a small sample size in IPA to support “a commitment to the particular, in the sense of detail (italics in original), and therefore the depth of analysis” (p. 29). Thus, by choosing IPA and a small sample size, the researcher can delve deeply into the experiences of each student in the sample which is not as possible with a substantially larger group.

The study site for this research was a large, urban, private university in the northeastern United States. Specifically, the study site was one of the colleges within that university, a college in which a high number of online, adult learners with a four-year degree completion goal who began their studies at the community college level completed their degree. To reach the sample, students met all of the above criteria. The strategy to identify this target population was as follows:

1. Narrow the population of graduates of the institution to include only those who earned four-year degrees (i.e. eliminate graduates who were associate degree completers or master’s degree completers from the database).
2. Eliminate remaining students who did not begin their studies at the community college level (i.e. select only students with transfer credit from a community college prior to entry). These students did not need to have earned an associate degree at a community college, but rather they successfully completed at least one term of coursework and earned a passing grade in at least one course. A student who began studies at a community college but did not have at least one course completed with a grade of C or better was not included in this study.

3. Eliminate remaining students who were twenty-four years old or younger at time of graduation (i.e. traditional-aged students).

4. Eliminate remaining students who took fewer than 100% of their courses online at the baccalaureate level.

5. Reach out to all who remained in the pool to invite them to participate in the study.

6. Randomly choose four to eight students (with an equal number of male and female students if possible) from the final pool of students who agree to participate in the study.

7. Thank the volunteers who were not chosen to participate in the study.

Participants were invited to take part in the study and were informed generally that the study was focused on exploring student persistence. Participants were not required to reveal personally-identifiable information, as confidentiality was supported and preserved. However, participants were asked to provide detail as it related to their personal experiences with respect to their student persistence and success. Participants had the option of choosing to end their
participation at any time up to data analysis if they wished to discontinue participating in the study. None did so.

Prior to the interviews, each participant was provided a detailed explanation of the nature of the study and their role in the study. In addition, prior to each interview, the researcher explained the nature and purpose of signed consent, the interview process, and how the data would be collected, secured, and analyzed. During that time, the researcher answered any follow-up questions regarding the nature of the research and participant involvement. Each participant was additionally assured of confidentiality as well as of the opportunity to withdraw from the study up to the point of data analysis. Each participant was then asked to sign a form of consent, in accordance with the University’s Instructional Review Board (IRB) process. This was to both promote protection for the participants and give participants a sense of the flow and expectations of the research. Participants could be local or at a distance away. To keep with a consistent means of interviewing, a conference call style of phone interview was conducted. These were audio-recorded, with recordings stored and to be later destroyed in accordance with IRB requirements. An equal balance of male and female participants was desired and sought. Four female and one male participant comprised the final group of students. The researcher provided a nominal gift ($10.00 gift card) as a token of appreciation for participating in the study.

Data Collection

Data collection techniques stemming from the use of in-depth interviewing, structured, semi-structured, or unstructured were used. According to Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2012), “In terms of devising a data collection method, IPA is best suited to one which will invite
participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences. In-depth interviews and diaries are important and “may be the best means of accessing such accounts” (p.56). Because IPA concerns itself with providing detail with respect to the lived experiences of participants, in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to fully collect data and determine common themes. This mode additionally allowed for the participants to fully share their experiences and for the researcher to listen deeply and intently to the participants. From these in-depth interviews, participants had an increased opportunity to provide thoughtful, personal responses as well as provide examples/stories to support their responses (Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun 2012; Maxwell, 2005). In addition, in-depth interviewing allowed for unique responses/stories told (Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun 2012).

The data collection from this research closely followed Seidman’s (2006) three-interview approach. Seidman recommended this approach to support a mode that “combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology” (p. 15). The types of questions used by the researcher were open-ended in nature to support an opportunity for participants to “build upon and explore their responses to those questions, with the goal being to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under scrutiny” (p. 15). The three-interview approach in particular was used as a means through which participants could build upon their experiences and the interviewer could check for internal consistency. In addition, the researcher was able to identify common themes in the experiences provided. Seidman identified the three-interview process as benefitting an IPA approach. “The three-interview structure incorporates features that enhance IPA study validity” (Seidman, 2006, p. 24). Through a process of interviewing participants three times
over a one-to-three week period, the researcher checked commentary against both earlier data from that participant as well as the data from other participants.

All three series of interviews were recorded by a secure, professional recording service. This recording service, FreeConferenceCall.com, offered a cost-effective, HD-quality, secure medium in which researcher and participant could log on and correspond from virtually any location. Recording, transferring the recordings, and playback for the researcher were secure and easy to manage. Sessions were time and date stamped, and included length of conversation. These audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service, Rev.com. This professional transcription service offered secure, accurate transcription from audio to text. It offered services with technical support (to confirm and/or revise transcript accuracy) and quick turnaround. All recordings and transcriptions were completed and secured in compliance with IRB guidelines.

The first interview focused on the personal background of the interviewee. The purpose of that interview was to create context for the researcher. This included general, background information on the participant, such as but not limited to age, gender, family status, employment status, and institutions attended. Questions during the first interview were geared towards gathering information regarding the interviewee’s life experiences, work experiences, experiences with family and friends (Seidman, 2006), and most importantly for this study experiences with schooling.

The second interview focused on more definitive, specific details as they related to the interviewee’s present or very recent experience with the topic of the study. The purpose of that interview was to gather stories, points of action, and other first-hand moments that directly
related with the topic of study (Seidman, 2006). Questions during the second interview were geared toward hearing specific reasons/examples/interpretations in detail as they related to student persistence and success - in other words, how the participant succeeded and how they interpreted how and why they did succeed.

In the third interview, interviewees were asked to “reflect on the meaning of their experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 18). The purpose of the third interview was to pull the totality of the interviews together to not only find common themes, but to also find an understanding of the meaning of the participants’ experiences (Seidman, 2006). Questions during the third interview were geared towards exploring various influences on the participants – what has brought them to a degree completion goal and the meaning behind why they succeeded. The third interview additionally afforded the participants the opportunity to share any information they felt might have been overlooked or not asked but important in their eyes as it pertained to the study.

Participants were asked open-ended questions in each of the three interview sessions. Interviews were spaced approximately a week apart (Seidman, 2006). Interviews with participants took place at a time mutually convenient for interviewer and interviewee so as to avoid bias, influence, or distraction. Participants were given an outline of the interview schedule beforehand. This allowed participants to be informed of the process and to feel comfortable with the interview structure and protocol. Triangulation and member checking were employed to verify information provided by the participants.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted and it involved detailing and interpreting the lived experiences of each of the participants so that themes could emerge and be explored. The
emphasis with data analysis was not so much fitting the data into existing systems or theoretical frameworks, but rather with ensuring that the lived experience was told from the perspective of each of the participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). During the data analysis stage, an IPA researcher “attempts to identify and describe aspects of each individual’s perceptions and reactions to his or her experience in some detail” (Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun 2012, p. 432). That is, there is an emphasis on explaining the experiences not through the researcher’s eyes, but rather through the eyes of those who lived it, on their terms (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). As such, IPA researchers must be careful to analyze “by studying multiple perceptions of the phenomenon as experienced by different people, and then by trying to determine what is common to these perceptions and actions” (Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun 2012, p. 432). To this, at every point possible the researcher used the participants’ own words to describe their perceptions as to how and why they experienced success, both at the micro and the macro level.

While every researcher might approach data analysis differently depending upon their individual skillset/familiarity with IPA, ability to take notes, organization of data, personal preferences, and other factors, there are a number of steps that were taken during data analysis. Upon the completion of the interview process, a thorough review and analysis of the data was conducted, beginning with a re-reading of and listening to the interview responses of each participant. The researcher was involved in “reading and re-reading” (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012, p. 82) the data as a first step and means of “immersing oneself in some of the original data” and “to ensure that the participant becomes the focus of the analysis” (p. 82). In addition, “to begin the process of entering the participant’s world it is important to enter a phase of active engagement with the data” a thorough reading and multiple re-reading of the data is necessary. The researcher did engage in multiple readings and multiple listens to the recorded
interviews. The emphasis on multiple re-readings was important, for “repeated reading also allows a model of the overall interview structure to develop, and permits the analyst to gain an understanding of how narratives can bind certain sections of the interview together” (p. 82). That is, from a process of repeated reading, common themes or patterns within the individual narratives were observed. Re-reading transcripts multiple times also related to identification of common themes and patterns among participants. Through content analysis, emergent themes manifested themselves. These emergent themes were seen as common data/findings among the participants.

The second step, “initial noting” (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012, p.83) served to ensure “a growing familiarity with the transcript, and, moreover, it begins to identify specific ways by which the participant talks about, understands, and thinks about an issue” (p. 83). The researcher made initial notes in no particular order or pattern, but instead focused on putting the analysis to initial motion. This is critical to IPA, since the focus is on “the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (p. 1). Initial noting was free-form and not necessarily organized in any way as the researcher saw fit. The purpose here was “not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive” but rather free-flowing and descriptive in nature. The intention was to get an engagement with the text underway.

The third step, “developing emergent themes” (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012, p. 91) helped to manage the data so as to “reduce the volume of detail (the transcript and initial notes) whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping relationships, connections, and patterns between exploratory notes” (p. 91 parentheses in original). By doing this, the narrative flow of each interview was broken, but at the same time a reorganization of the data took place. Since each stage of data analysis in IPA “does indeed take you further away from the participant and
includes more of you” (p. 91-92), this process of developing emergent themes felt unusual at first. Thus, it was important for the researcher to express themes in short phrases as a means of making sure “the focus is on capturing what is crucial at this point in the text” (p. 92) even though “inevitably you will also be influenced by the whole text” (p. 92). For this study, five themes emerged.

The fourth step, “searching for connections across emergent themes” (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012, p. 92), was used to find any basic patterns developed among the emergent themes found. This can be described as “the development of a charting, or mapping, of how the analyst thinks the themes fit together” (p. 96). To do this, a number of methods, including abstraction (putting similar parts of themes together to form a super-ordinate theme), polarization (looking at opposite relationships), contextualization (answering what is the context in which the themes lie in the text), numeration (how frequent or infrequent the themes present themselves), and function (themes’ function within the transcript) were utilized. Some of these methods worked well, some did not work well at all. For this part, the researcher conducted additional reading and re-reading as it applied to the specific emergent themes.

The fifth step, “moving on to the next case” (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012, p. 100), and sixth step, “looking for patterns across cases” (p. 101), were used to put it all together. Regarding each narrative, the researcher found that “it is possible to write up a single case as a case study report” (p. 100). That is, each narrative was viewed in itself as its own, unique case. However, there were multiple narratives since there were multiple participants. As such, it was necessary to treat each participant narrative as its own case, and to move on to the next case when one case analysis was completed. This meant bracketing the analysis/themes found in the prior case before going on to the next case, so as not to influence the next case. All influences
and biases could not be completely neutralized, but nonetheless it was important for the researcher to allow themes to freely develop for each case. In the final step, patterns or themes were sought across the cases. Here, common themes were gleaned and prioritized (i.e. how frequent, important one theme might be compared to others). As such, the researcher found instances that demonstrated “sometimes this will lead to a reconfiguring or relabeling of themes” (p. 101). Consequently, some themes had to be re-worked or re-named.

Upon the completion of the interview process, a thorough review and analysis of the data was conducted, beginning with multiple re-reading of and listening to the interview responses of each participant. From there, extensive note-taking was made. Not only did this note-taking phase involve organizing experiences with student success, but it also involved the analysis of factors contributing to student success, elicited from any and all emerging themes found. Moreover, connections among the emerging themes found were examined and analyzed. This included looking at each emergent theme in itself and understanding it in itself as well as in relation to the whole of the data – consistent with the process of hermeneutics. Further connections (or not) among the data were analyzed. This included noting and commenting on similarities and differences among the participants’ recollections and student experiences as well as the evaluation of common themes that may emerge (Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun 2012). Upon the completion of data analysis, the results were written.

**Validity and Credibility**

As a qualitative approach involving the lived experiences of human participants, a number of checks and balances were considered and implemented in order to secure as high a level of validity and credibility as possible. First and foremost, the researcher whenever and
wherever possible set aside personal perceptions and biases. IPA is interpretative in nature, and as such different levels of interpretation can and will exist throughout the research process. At the same time, “those interpretations must always be grounded in the meeting of researcher and text” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). It was important for the researcher to do this so the object or event studied (student success regarding community college entrants who went on to a four-year degree completion goal as an adult learner, online student) was seen as clearly as possible from the perspective of the researcher experiencing the experiences of the participants. While “it is probably true that no matter how hard observers try to stay impartial, their observations will possess some degree of bias” with respect to conducting research, “all researchers should do their best to become aware of, and try to control, their biases” (Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun 2012, p. 448). Knowing this, regardless of how impartial the researcher was, it should be assumed that some bias remained. At the same time, the researcher constantly reminded himself of the importance and need to recognize the potential for bias as well as the importance and need to control or minimize those biases.

Given that the definitions of validity and credibility can vary somewhat depending upon the researcher, it was important for the researcher to state how validity and credibility were defined to promote a sense of clarity and transparency with respect to the researcher’s organization and analysis of the data. This also promotes a sense of trustworthiness for the reader – trust that the researcher was diligent and straightforward in the presentation and analysis of the data. In this research study, the researcher defined validity and credibility to mean authenticity and trustworthiness. That is, the research can be seen as valid and credible if it is authentic – an accurate representation of the exploration into the lived experiences of online, adult learners and the attainment of a bachelor’s degree via a community college starting point.
In addition, the research can be seen as valid and credible if it is trustworthy – the research was
gained through transparent, ethical, and academically-appropriate measures and methodology.

Validity and credibility were secured through the means by which the interviews were
conducted, recorded, and analyzed. Interviews were conducted in a time, place, and setting that
was comfortable for the participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Fostering a sense of
comfort allowed the participants to openly and freely respond to questions, increasing the chance
for thoughtful, detailed, and layered responses. In addition, interviews followed a three-
interview process which incorporated and enhanced IPA study validity (Seidman, 2006).
Through a process of interviewing participants three times over a one-to-three-week period, the
researcher checked commentary against both earlier comments of that participant and other
participants. In addition, the internal consistency of the comments of the participants was
checked, which strengthened a participant’s comments.

Triangulation was used to support validity and credibility in the research process.
Triangulation is the examination of varied sources as a means of comparison to see if
facts/situations agree. The use of triangulation supported the validity and credibility of the
research study (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun 2012). Triangulation was important
because it’s use “improves the quality of the data that are collected and the accuracy of the
researcher’s interpretations” and “can work with any subject, in any setting, at any level”
(Fraenkel, Whallen, & Hyun 2012, p. 517). By using triangulation in this study, the researcher
verified the accuracy of information. In addition, triangulation informed the researcher of
respected scholars in the field of study (i.e. if a scholar is referenced in multiple sources, or if
multiple sources test and show data to be valid and credible). In addition, the process of
triangulation provided the researcher a justification for emerging themes in the research (Creswell, 2009).

Member checking was also employed to support validity and credibility in the research. Member checking is a process by which information provided by a member or group is verified for accuracy by that member or group. Especially under an IPA approach, it was important for participants to have the opportunity to review facts/themes for accuracy, correct any transcribing or reporting errors, and correct any errors in the interpretation of experiences. Even small, unintentional errors can sometimes have potentially-damaging consequences for the research, misleading researcher and readers alike. Member checking allows for unforeseen or unintentional errors to be corrected, adding to the validity of the researcher’s qualitative interpretations (Creswell, 2009).

Protection of Human Subjects

The protection of human subjects was of the utmost importance during this entire research process. The protection of human subjects supports the avoidance of harm at the most fundamental level. This avoidance of harm to human subjects applies to both physical and emotional harm (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). As such, participant consent was secured for every stage of the research study. Personal privacy was at the core of protecting participants, and it was described at the time of request for consent. It was important for the researcher to institute deliberate measures to preserve anonymity. In order to maintain confidentiality, all interviews were conducted under circumstances comfortable for the participants. Participants had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time of their choosing up to the point of data analysis. Notes did not include the name of the participant or other personally-identifiable
information. Notes and/or transcripts of interviews were coded and encrypted and will be kept only so long as necessary to satisfy academic and IRB requirements. Finally, the study and its development otherwise closely followed IRB requirements and participant protections as they related to the use of human subjects. This included the IRB requirement that agreement to participate forms must be maintained for a set period of time. See appendix for a copy of IRB requirements as they were followed for this research.

**Format of Interviews**

All interviews took place via telephone, in specific via teleconferencing. This allowed for a secure, recordable line and also allowed the researcher and participant to use any phone line to call in. There was no cost to the participants to utilize a teleconferencing option. All days/times were agreed upon by the participants and were conducted when the participants were located in a place convenient and comfortable to them. An occasional re-scheduling of interviews did take place for some participants, though all rounds were spaced approximately one week apart individually and collectively. Re-scheduling took place the same day or next day when re-scheduling was necessary.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study involved interviews of a small population of students at a single college/university during a specific degree conferral point. This point was April 14, 2016. This college/university was located in the Northeast section of the United States. As such, the results should not be considered generalizable to all students who meet these criteria at other institutions, nor all students at other institutions. In addition, because participants were asked to self-select if they met the criteria prior to the random selection, this act required participants to
be a little more proactive than if all eligible participants were directly selected for the invitation. While all participants or potential participants who responded were verified by the researcher to ensure they met the criteria, the proactive method in participants self-selecting could still be seen as attracting more proactive individuals than normal for a research study. In addition, it is possible to infer that individuals who agree to participate in a study in general are inherently more engaged, successful individuals to begin with.

It was also an assumption of the researcher that participants answered truthfully and candidly with respect to the interview questions in general, and to how and why they felt they succeeded in specific. While member-checking and triangulation were employed wherever possible to verify facts and statements, the researcher had to have faith the students who participated in this study took their roles seriously and were honest and transparent with their responses. It was also the assumption of the researcher answered questions in good faith, providing answers and recollections to the best of their abilities.

Another limitation of this study was the fact there was only one male participant (compared with four female participants). While an equal number of male and female participants were desired, due to factors beyond the control of the researcher only one male participant qualified and took part. Of all the responses, several male individuals responded, though only one male participant was found to qualify/meet the necessary criteria.

**Statement of Positionality**

Through the process of preparing the literature review, twenty-plus years as a professional, and ten-plus years as a student (these years overlap) in higher education, I have seen/experienced much with respect to explaining why students drop out and fail. I have also
seen many, many students succeed. Additionally, I have been a student who has succeeded at the undergraduate and graduate level. Finally, I am a spouse, parent, and coach and thus have experienced points at which people at varied levels succeed and/or fail. As a positive mindset-based person throughout all phases of my life, I have both studied and practiced persistence and success through finding the good and valuable in things and experiences, and building upon positives experiences in addition to correcting errors. Of course, the study of, acknowledgement of, and learning from failure is important and can help to overcome present and future obstacles. Nonetheless, I have seen both a dearth of literature in, as well as a need for, reflection on how and why (from their perspective/voice) students persist and succeed.
Chapter Five: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to conduct scholarly research on community college entrants who continued and attained their baccalaureates online as adult learner students, identifying their understandings of their success through their experiences that contributed to the completion of their baccalaureate. The participants in this study provided detailed, personal accounts of their experiences, including specific moments of success and overall successes and how they perceived the meaning and value of these successes.

A total of five students, four female and one male, took part in this study.

One-hundred and seventy-six students (students completing their baccalaureate in April 2016) were messaged to self-select to participate in the study. Five students met the criteria and were willing to participate. All participants were over the age of twenty-five and all participants began their studies at the community college level as campus-based students who continued on as adult learner students to complete their baccalaureate degrees online. All five participants completed their academic work to qualify for an April 2016 degree conferral date (April 14, 2016). The researcher verified that all participants met all criteria for the study. Each round of interviews, three in total, were spaced approximately one week apart from one another. The three-week period began the week of May 9, 2016, continued the week of May 16, 2017, and ended the week of May 23, 2016. Each participant was interviewed three times, with each individual interview lasting between twenty-five and forty-five minutes. Total interview time for each participant, then, averaged sixty to ninety minutes overall. All interviews were audio recorded by a secure, professional audio recording service and later transcribed by a secure,
professional transcribing service. The researcher verified the transcription by listening to the audio recording while reading the transcription, to ensure accuracy.

**Profile of the Participants**

Participants in the study are described in the following section, identified by pseudonyms in place of participants’ actual names.

Participant #1 (*Valerie*) – Valerie is a forty-one year old female originally from Toronto, Canada. She moved to the United States, gained United States citizenship, and completed her bachelor’s degree in the area of management after transferring in her associate degree from a Massachusetts-based community college. Valerie was friendly and personable and quick to share her experiences, thinking it would help others. She works for a United States government agency, which was the driving force to gain her citizenship – she could not hold the position without it. As she grew older, support from her family and her own inner drive helped her decide to pursue a degree. As a parent, she also wanted to inspire her children, especially as her children grew older. Earning a degree also served as validation of her professional skills. Additionally, she wanted to be a positive story for other women. As an adult learner, she entered an accelerated-format two-year degree program and found it was a good fit for her. The community college was situated very close to her residence and the accelerated format offered convenience as well. She succeeded there and continued on immediately at a four-year degree granting institution in a similar, cohort-model, accelerated-format program at the baccalaureate level. She chose the accelerated-format online program as it afforded familiarity for her and she chose online as it afforded convenience (she was employed full-time while earning her bachelor’s degree).
Valerie: I am originally from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I started at a community college ... the silly reason is because my kids went to school down the street from the school, so I thought that I would be there, close enough to watch out for them while I was at school, but that didn't really work out that way. I ended up going to an accelerated program that held classes on Saturdays, it was a hybrid program. It was called a fast track program, much like what [the University] had, and has. They were gearing it towards working professionals, which worked out great for me. I did that for 18 months and it seemed to be a fantastic program, and a great fit for me, and the other people there.

Participant #2 (Peggy) – Peggy is a fifty-six year old female who lives in the northern part of Massachusetts. She has two children. She helped run several businesses, opened a cosmetology school, and is currently a real estate agent. Upon completion of high school, she was accepted to Boston College and University of California, Los Angeles. However, she did not enter college at that time because of a combination of not being emotionally ready and not having outside support (family/friends) to convince her to go to college. Her family and environment at the time of acceptance to those institutions did not expect nor encourage women to pursue an education after high school. She has endured a number of life hardships (divorce, major injury due to a car accident, health challenges of family members, financial obstacles), but a combination of inner drive, strong work ethic, and other factors helped her go back to school, first at the community college level and then at the four-year institution level. Peggy was a Leadership major for her four-year degree pursuit. Peggy believes she has learned many life lessons along the way, and earning her two-year and four-year degree were important parts to her survive/persevere/succeed mindset.
**Peggy:** I have lived ... I'm thirty miles north of Boston. I have a varied background. I am a hairdresser by trade. I did originally go to college and get an associate's degree in Human Services in [the community college]. I stayed home and brought up two children for 20 years. I opened a cosmetology school and that was in the year 2000. I'm kind of like all over ... There's so much, I don't know where to begin.

Participant #3 (Tina) – Tina is a thirty-eight year-old female student and is a veteran of the United States Military (Army). She has two sons and lives with them in the southwestern part of the United States. Though she native to the southwestern part of the United States, she considers herself somewhat different or outside the typical person in her community. She was not encouraged by friends nor family to pursue higher education. She was not encouraged to go to college and could not afford it at the time had she been encouraged. A recurring theme in her life was those close to her did not feel she was smart enough to go to college, nor see the value in a college degree. This contributed to some lack or direction/focus when she was younger. When she was about thirty years old she visited a workforce center and met a counselor who encouraged her to apply to college. Through the process, she realized she could be successful in college. Her grades were consistently high and her teachers praised her level of intelligence. The community college she chose was local, but there were no good four-year institution options in her area. Thus, she researched quality online institutions and chose one thousands of miles from her home. She continued to be highly successful and graduated at the top of her class at the baccalaureate level. Her bachelor’s degree is in Organizational Communication.

**Tina:** I am 38 years old. I have 2 kids, 2 boys. When I was 18 I graduated high school, I didn't think that I could go to college because I really wasn't smart, and
I didn't have money. I thought at the time that only rich people went to college, and smart people. Which I wasn't either of them. I enlisted in the Army and I was in the Army Reserves for 8 years, which meant that I went to an Army unit one weekend a month and 2 weeks in the summertime. On my off time, I was a bartender and a waitress. Then I got married, and I became a stay at home mom. Then I got divorced, and I was about 30, I couldn't find a job because I had always had a really spotty, you know, working as a server and a bartender, so I couldn't find a job. A lady at the workforce center told me that, maybe I should decide to enroll in college. She explained the steps to me, and I realized that it wasn't really that scary; and I tried out, and I ended up enrolling in community college. Through my experience at the community college, I realized I could actually get a bachelor’s degree, and I found [the University], and here I am.

Participant #4 (Natalie) – Natalie is a twenty-nine-year old female and former student-athlete at the collegiate level. She has a large family of brothers, sisters, and cousins. She grew up in an area of Boston, Massachusetts lacking good educational resources, but had family who put a priority on education (her mother is a teacher, as well as other family members). Her sister in particular is a strong, positive influence in her life. Natalie’s high school grades and family financial situation steered her towards a community college starting point. She excelled as an athlete but did not put a similar effort into her studies. Her athletic ability allowed her to enter a community college on scholarship as a traditional-aged, student-athlete. She struggled with the transition to the college experience and struggled academically as well. At the time, her heart was not into doing the things necessary to be a successful student. However, a series of inspirational moments helped propel her to finish her associate degree and go on to a four-year
degree and succeed in completing that degree. Her bachelor’s degree is in Human Services. Natalie’s experience as an athlete taught her that practice was important towards success. However, for academics, practice was not enough – students needed to be taught how to learn in order to be more successful.

_Natalie: When I was at my community college it wasn't really like that. It was like, I played basketball so it was more about keeping me eligible- versus challenging me. Honestly, when I left I was very upset my last semester at [the community college]. I was very upset because I found out that I was left with all the hard classes, if that makes sense._

Participant #5 (_Robert_) – Robert is a fifty-one-year old male who is married and has two children. He grew up in New York and was an outstanding student early on. Upon completion of high school, Robert was accepted to Columbia University. Thus, even at an early age he was a high-achieving student. However, he felt he was not ready for college and instead went into the retail/restaurant industries. A falling-out with his parents was also a factor in choosing this path. His occupations kept him busy as he built a career and a family. Then a life-threatening physical challenge, which also became a financial burden, inspired him to first begin and then complete his associate degree. This included a nursing school starting point and an associate degree in general sciences. As he progressed academically and because of this life-threatening health challenge, Robert’s academic focus changed direction at times. He found and renewed a passion to help others and contribute to helping others. As an online student (the program he chose offered convenience and speed), he went on to earn a Bachelor of Science in Health Management.
Robert: I used to be in the retail and restaurant industry. I never went forward with an education because I worked my way through at the beginning of school in the late 80s but then I had an offer that I received from one of my close friends through (major hotel) and I went to work instead of going to school. I kind of dropped out. That's how I went into restaurant management and then I became a general manager for [major office-supply company]. I had a long career in retail and in 2007 I had a very physical set back where I almost died and passed away and even today I think about it. It reminds me how precious life is.

**Common Findings Among the Data**

Through the analysis of the data described in detail in the Methodology chapter, emergent themes were identified in the process of analysis. These themes were identified in each participant narrative and among all five participants and reinforced on more than one occasion in several instances. The emergent themes are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common Findings Among the Data</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finding #1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finding # 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finding # 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finding #4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finding # 5</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to these emergent themes, a number of other findings were identified as a result of the analysis of data. The other findings were either common among several participants or noteworthy for a particular participant in the study. For example, several participants pointed to building affinity/community during the degree pursuit as noteworthy. Other findings included importance of cost, course and program format, degree program choice, online availability, high-quality and career-relevant reputation of the institution, financial aid eligibility, and open access/easy navigation of admissions process, academic advising and other institutional resources. In addition, some students completed their baccalaureate (once the navigation from community college to four-year institution was complete) in as few as eighteen months (via accelerated degree completion program) to several years (go-at-your-own-pace method). Finally, faculty support in the form of providing multiple teaching formats, course requirement flexibility, real-world relevance, and positive, encouraging approach was noteworthy for several participants.

**Inner-Drive or Self-Motivation as a Prime Factor to their Ultimate Success**

All participants pointed inward to themselves as the major driving force to both motivate them to begin their studies and keep them on track during their studies online at the baccalaureate level. In fact, each participant prioritized inner drive or self-motivation as perhaps the most important factor to their ultimate success. The topic of inner-drive came up the most often of any other finding, and participants often stressed its importance as critical to their success from their perspective. Though each may have had a differing reason to complete their baccalaureate, all stressed the importance of their own self-motivation as positively contributing to their success.
**Tina:** It's morphed into a point where I'm trying to prove myself wrong. I've proved everybody else wrong, and now I'm still trying to tell myself that there is even more. I can't keep settling for what I've got. I've got to keep trying harder, because I know I can do better. I know I can do more. Everything's fine. There's just something inside me that keeps saying, "I know I can do more."

**Peggy:** It took a lot of falls along the way, even in relationships, it gets to that point. Yes. Then when I did, every time I got up again, I said, "Nope, I'm going to do it this time. I'm going to really do it."

**Robert:** I decided it was more of a determination that I was not going to be at the bottom. I was on top and I will recover and come back and be on top. That was also the driving force that I did not want to see my kids think, "Dad fell down. Dad's not able to get up." No. If I can fall down at this age and I can get up, so can you at any time. I think that was more of a positive and a personal statement that I wanted to make. Even today some of my friends are amazed at how far I have come and they can't believe that I have recovered so well.

**Natalie:** Honestly, that moment right there (transitioning from two-year degree pursuit to four-year degree pursuit) was the moment that I was okay you need to get your sugar, honey, ice tea together now.

**Natalie:** I was like, "If I want it, I'm going to go get it." Basically, I was like, "All right. You're a go-getter. This is what you want, and you can get it."

**Natalie:** I guess the biggest success is believing in yourself, believing that you can do it. I think that's what has helped me say, "Okay, I know that you took four
years to get out of a two-year. Okay. You took a year off. You had some things going on in your life, but that’s okay. Now, you picked up, tied your shoes, and you’re up and on your feet. You dust yourself off, now it’s time to just get it done and get it over with."

**Valerie:** Where did my desire come from? I think it was just intrinsic, I think it was intrinsic. I attributed it all to being in America. When people say that you, in America you can fulfill dreams here and do this, I feel like living here, I don’t feel like when I lived in Canada. I feel like everything is possible here. When somebody tells me that something is not possible, I stop dead in my tracks and I say, "You cannot tell me that, that something is not possible in America."

For each participant, an inner search indicated a self-need to take steps forward with respect to their educational goals. More specifically, an event or series of events served as a turning point, but in the end it was each participant’s inner desire to make that turn towards actualizing their goals. Each of the participants pointed to their own self-motivation as a critical component in their quest to complete their four-year degree. Each of the participants felt the inner desire had to be there to be successful, a key piece missing the first time they began their journey or early in their journey. Certainly other variables affected their own student persistence and success; the foundation of ultimate success centered on a participant’s own, inner intent or motivation to be successful. Participants acknowledged both opportunities and challenges to their persistence, such as family, finances, college readiness, and employment status. However, each participant reinforced the notion that they themselves had control over whether or not they could be successful, and at some point moved (through self-motivation or inner drive) to get there.
Thus, the ultimate marker of success as far as the participants were concerned depended upon the individual’s ability to self-motivate and become integrated/invested in their own educational goals as well as in the institution. That is, they understood they had much control over their own path. This is supported by the participant interviews, as each articulated the fact that it was up to them to step up and complete courses/finish their degrees.

**Natalie:** *In my mind, I was like, "Okay, this is something I want, too."*

**Robert:** *The number one reason I would definitely say would be my drive. I decided that I'm going to embark on this journey, and I'm going to see it through all the way to the end. Whether it was an Associate's, Bachelor's, and ultimately Master's, I think my wife will stop me after Master's, and not pursue my PhD or she will leave me. That was the threat anyway that she had given.*

**Natalie:** *One of the things is that I truly feel that. I feel like I've worked hard to transition from a community college where things were kind of like, "Ehh, I don't really know if I'm going to achieve success in a four-year." But because I was very strong-willed and I wanted it- I was like, "If I want it, I'm going to go get it." Basically, I was like, "All right. You're a go-getter. This is what you want, and you can get it."

**Valerie:** *But I'm driven now, you've got to decide where you want to be.*

While the online format allowed for flexibility and lower cost to completing their baccalaureate goals, it was not widely discussed as a critical factor to persistence and success. A student’s inner drive seemed to consistently be the most significant factor in propelling a student towards overall success.
Influence of Family and Friends as Motivators to Succeed and Persist

All participants pointed to family and friends as motivational factors in completing their four-year degree online after starting from a community college path. Through analysis of the participant interviews, it was apparent that this influence of family and friends was both from the family/friends helping or inspiring the individual as well as the individual desiring to be a positive role model to their family/friends (especially their own children).

Valerie: It's going to sound silly. The first one is family. Obviously, I want to be a great example for my children, and I feel inferior to people who have had education before me. I was always smart when I was younger, compared to my friends who were all at the University of Toronto when I was working, but I never really had a degree. I always doubted myself, I never thought I was smart enough, so I have finally come into my own, and I want to prove it to myself, and obviously to my kids that I'm able to do it. I was always scared of it, and I was never motivated, because of support from my family, but now that's different. I hold the cards, I deal the way that I want to make it.

Valerie: The last time you asked me, "What would you attribute to your success?"
I started thinking about it and I mentioned all those names to you and all the different people that surround me, it has a lot to do, you can do it on your own, if you're strong willed and everything, but your support system certainly has to be credited for your success. It's not just you alone. If I don't have somebody running my house when I can't do it, it's not going to happen. Everybody gets involved.
Natalie: Yes, my family - they're very big on, like I said, on education. They're very big on helping. We're a really big family so there's no reason why you can't help. I can say for myself there are tons of times where I needed money for a $200 book or I needed money for whatever it was. It was like call around the family and see what each person can give. What they can donate to that.

Tina: Just everyone in my life realizes that I couldn't do family events, and I couldn't do any kind of extra-curricular thing because I had my job and my kids so any extra time I had went to school. It helped that my family and friends understood that.

Tina: You have to have a good support system all around.

Other times, participants focused on a particular person as inspirational or acting like a cornerstone. Usually, it was a family member:

Peggy: My husband helped me out with that a lot because he was very good in history and very good in ... He went to [prestigious private prep school], had a great education, so ... and started explaining things and then it made a lot of sense while I was doing these courses in international relations and globalization.

Peggy: My kid was working full-time and she's like, "Mom, just go to this and click this and... " My cousin who had learned a little about it, she's about my age, she was working full-time but (also) helped a bit.

Natalie: I feel like a lot of them were very helpful, especially my sister. Me and her ended up going to college at the same time, so you can just imagine the
encouragement when you have two sisters and we're a month and a year apart.
You can imagine how close we are.

…but not always a family member:

**Robert:** My friends, I have a couple of friends. I have couple of individuals who are in very high-ranking positions in a couple of companies. One of them is actually coming over Saturday to my house because I had invited him for a post-graduation dinner. He is another motivating factor. He even tells his children, "See, if Robert can do this, you guys should be able to do this without a problem. Look at him at this age how well he's studying, and how hard he's dedicated towards his career."

And, in one case, a participant as a student took part in the creation of an in-person community of friends to help inspire her (and others) down her path.

**Tina:** I think it's easier to talk overall because I did become the valedictorian and I had the highest GPA. A big, huge part that contributed to that was we made a Facebook group early on in our cohort, because it was a cohort. We made a Facebook group during the first term and our cohort joined it and it really helped so much because we could ask each other about assignments or help with group work, just kind of talk about the experience together, problems we were having with professors, that kind of thing. It made it into an in-person community, because online students since you're everywhere it's kind of hard to have that connection. I think that was one of the biggest things because when you're doing an online degree it's like you're doing it alone, so when we did that it was like we
were all living in a dorm together almost, it was like we weren't doing it alone.

That's a huge, huge contributing factor.

**Tina:** Then with the Facebook group you have a set of friends that are going through the same thing, we're all full-time workers, a lot of us were full-time parents. You have to have a good support system all around.

All participants pointed to family/friends as an important, helpful and positive role in each participant’s ultimate success. This took several forms. Sometimes, the participants turned to a family member for tangible support – help with work around the home, providing the ability to have large blocks of free time available, and completing other life tasks. Other times, it was a shoulder to lean on, a person to listen, or a resource to empathize with.

**Overall Institutional Support as Fostering Success/Creating Clear Pathways to Success**

Each participant pointed to some member of the institution or some institutional resource that propelled them further along in the program. Each participant noted the support of the institution as welcoming and encouraging. On multiple occasions, participants pointed to overall institutional support as important to their success in making a transition from the community college setting to completing an online, four-year degree program as an adult learner student. Some specific examples were given with respect to specific resources – a faculty member, an academic advisor, a course, an academic resource. Program offerings/formats were also important. Participants also noted an overall, general feeling of institutional support as important to their ultimate success.

This institutional support took place both at the community college level starting point as well as the four-year institution point. Specific to the community college starting point:
Valerie: I wanted to go directly to [the University], but I wasn't really familiar. University is not the same here as it is in Canada, so I had to learn everything from the beginning. It's not like I grew up knowing this stuff. I didn't know what a community college was, we don't have community college, so I had to sit there and ask a million questions, then I figured it out.

Robert: She [college administrator/academic program contact] encouraged me to finish the semester and then shift out so that it won't negatively reflect and also it won't show that I gave up again. Based on that I finished the term and then I switched out. I withdrew from the program and I also went ahead and finished my associates in general sciences. I was very good in sciences. I guess second calling you might say. Then I went to [the University] because I wanted to finish off the Bachelor’s in Healthcare Management.

Tina: I was lucky to have professors in the community college system that could see me and could see that there was no part of me that wanted to be a nurse. I was only doing it for money. They explained to me the whole transfer process, because before that I had no idea what that was. I didn’t realize I could also get a bachelor's degree. It was very confusing, but I was lucky enough to have a few professors along the way that explained the process to me. Explained to me there was more than this little bitty town that I live in in south Texas, and that I could get a bachelor's degree.

Peggy: I said, ”You know what? I'm going back to school. If I'm going to sit here and do real estate from a computer. I might as well start now. If I keep saying
'next year, next year,' I'm never going to do it." I looked and looked and I saw that [the University] offered this program. I called and then I called again and called a few other colleges, made some comparisons. I said, "You know what? I did my associate's degree, took courses every 8 weeks when my kids were little and I think I can do this 12 week and I'm going to try it [the program]."

**Tina:** Through my experience at the community college, I realized I could actually get a bachelor’s degree, and I found [the University], and here I am.

Specific to the four-year institution point:

**Natalie:** They were exceptionally helpful when it came to just making sure you knew what you were doing as far as your financial aid, your classes. Especially having your advisor, your success coach or counselor, you have that person who stays up on things with you.

**Valerie:** I think that the school being supportive and helping you along your way is priceless. I told you before that I had a great advisor. Everybody that I came in contact with. I had a few people here and there who, I wanted to hang up and call back, but for the most part, everybody was great. They want to see you attain your goal. Which makes it easier for you. You know that somebody's on your side. You're not sitting here by yourself.

**Valerie:** Everybody gets involved. [Name withheld] with the scholarships. I remember that other guy's name with the other scholarships. People, kind words, like [the University] in general, everybody wants to support you. They all want to invest in your success.
**Peggy:** I think we had a lot of positive reinforcement in this course, in this degree program. I think we have an ample opportunity to question our instructor whether it’s through email or through Blackboard if we don’t understand a question. We also have an opportunity to work in groups and get to know, which is so important.

**Natalie:** Just having, like I said, the support system. Having the teachers’ support, I think. The college itself is a supporter. Working with other people because in those classes I had to learn to work with other people. I don't really like group work, but you have to learn to work with other people, and you learn. I learned more things and I learned different techniques from other people too.

**Robert:** As far as [the University], I had a very nice teacher who went out of her way... I did a project for one of my classes...When I started that, and she was really, really impressed the way the project was going. She was looking forward to the finish of it because we're still continuing it even though the class is over. She understood that the progression is still there. The input she gave (was invaluable).

**Natalie:** All in all, it was very communitive in the fact of they made sure that they stayed in contact to make sure that you obtained the most success in the classroom. It was given to you. The thing about it was I felt like they gave it to you, it's just that you had to continue to make sure that you succeeded in getting the grades.
**Natalie:** Coming to [the University], I felt that they were more supportive and they were really on top of, "This is what you need to do to graduate," and, "this is what we have available."

**Specific Person or Event at the Institution as Inspirational/Impactful**

Participants were easily able to point to a specific person or event in their academic path that proved inspirational. For some, it was a particular course, or a particular faculty member who taught that course, or combination. In these types of instances, it might be difficult to understand definitively if it was the course or the faculty that had more impact. What was important for the participant, however, was that it had a positive impact on their path.

**Peggy:** One of my first courses was [name withheld] and she was amazing. That was one of the first courses that were offered in leadership and the reason being is because I think she kind of knew how to set the stage on what leadership was and what it can be.

**Natalie:** She is amazing. I took two courses that she was teaching. One of the best things that I learned was about self-care. Her book that she wrote and was one of the course materials, that book definitely, well the class overall, it taught me how to not get down on myself and realize what my stress is in school.

**Robert:** I'd like to highlight that one class that I really, really enjoyed at [the community college] was the Career Path class. In most students' terms, it's a very boring and cumbersome class. I think it gives you an insight into who you are... The class itself was very nice. The teacher who taught us was a 74 year-old man who had worn many hats in [the public, state university] as well as at [the...
community college]. He was one of the Deans of the college as well, at [the public, state university]. He gave in a sense, he sat down, and he explained...

Other than that, that class gave a good insight. I knew that I belonged in healthcare. It solidified for me. That that's the path that I should be taking.

**Tina:** We made a Facebook group during the first term and our cohort joined it and it really helped so much because we could ask each other about assignments or help with group work, just kind of talk about the experience together, problems we were having with professors, that kind of thing. It made it into an in-person community, because online students since you're everywhere it's kind of hard to have that connection. I think that was one of the biggest things because when you're doing an online degree it's like you're doing it alone, so when we did that it was like we were all living in a dorm together almost, it was like we weren't doing it alone. That's a huge, huge contributing factor. That and time management.

**Natalie:** It was more personal. You got to connect on that level, and I've got to speak to a few people who are like, "Oh my gosh, we have so much in common. Oh my gosh. I'm doing this too." Again, like I said, it was an experience where I actually got to learn from other people as well.

Other times, it was a college administrator who made a profound effect on the participant’s path to success. In these types of instances, the administrator proved to be both a guiding force to help with a level of bureaucracy associated to the college experience as well as a calming, helping influence on an individual:
Valerie: My friend is the Dean of College Advancement there [the community college]. I went and I saw him the night before I saw an advisor or anything. I said to him "I'm lost, I don't know where to start. I don't know what to do." He walked me down to advising and I didn't need an appointment or anything, he just asked somebody to sit with me and to talk with me. That's how it all got the ball rolling. I was lucky to have known somebody who could, who helped me. If you want to go back and talk about people who influenced me, he was certainly one of them.

Sometimes, the person of positive influence was not even associated with a college/university:

Tina: The lady at Workforce Center told me that I could take out loans. I hadn't really thought about that, so I went home and researched it. I ended up taking out loans as investment in my future and how I'm validated to myself, because I didn't want my kids to grow up the way I did. I would never see them if I was working two or three jobs. I would never be able to go anywhere further, except for [being stuck at a certain point in life]... That would be the rest of my life. I wasn't going to have that for me or my kids.

Valerie: There was a lady, one of the mothers of the hockey players [at the University] that we are friendly with. She used to sit up there [with me in at the University arena] and I used to talk with her and talk with her, and she was a doctor at [major hospital], and she influenced me. She gave me her business card one day, and I just sat there and I looked at her credentials. Between the typeset in the Jumbotron [at the University arena], and her business card, that's what
really, sort of got the wheels into motion. I thought of her, that she was like me, that she had three kids, and she had a husband who was a tradesperson, who was self-employed and made himself, then I can be this [complete a baccalaureate]. I can fulfill all of the roles that I want to fulfill.

Hearing from the participants’ perspectives, it was clear these events were not the only ones. Perhaps the participants were merely reflecting on the most noteworthy event they could remember. In each instance, the experience afforded knowledge and created focus for the student. In addition, these instances served as a catalyst to propel them further down a path of degree completion.

Success Paving the Way for More Success

The participants in this study each noted that success at one level (such as completing a course, learning an academic skill) led to more success (such as awareness of self or success in future courses) at either a deeper level or at the same level but for multiple future opportunities. That is, one experience of success served as a building block or stepping stone towards a future success:

Peggy: Who am I to say, "I can't do it." Yes, it's tiring, but once you get past that and it's over, it's like, "Woo, I did it!" It helps. It helps you move to the next level.

Valerie: Yes, but you know what? This has trained me to read, to be a better reader. I've become a speed reader. I never thought that I would have that talent, and all of a sudden I can absorb everything on a page, which is beside me.
Here, one learned skill lends itself to development that extends beyond the classroom. In other instances, a single course provided a means to improve an overall feeling of success or empowerment or enlightenment for a participant:

**Peggy:** At the end of this course [leadership course] I felt empowered I guess I would say. It became a course that not only made you feel empowered but the fact that you became so empowered that you wanted to share it with others and help others become empowered.

**Tina:** Now it's morphed into a point where I'm trying to prove myself wrong. I've proved everybody else wrong, and now I'm still trying to tell myself that there is even more. I can't keep settling for what I've got. I've got to keep trying harder, because I know I can do better. I know I can do more. Everything's fine. There's just something inside me that keeps saying, "I know I can do more."

Academic grades can also be a measurement of success to the point it promotes persistence:

**Natalie:** I learned, "Hey, you've got to put in the work." You have to, and this is the only way you're going to get the grades. That was something that was really successful for me because I'm like, "Oh my gosh, you actually did this. You're done, and you got a good grade out of the class." It made me feel good.

As a result, success in one area can foster success in other areas:

**Robert:** In the future [everything] is all combined because of my education. My academics opened the eyes as they say. It opened me to situations. It opened me to
the history of healthcare as well as how healthcare really works, and the ability to have that information.

There's a saying, "You are only as good as what you know." In this case, I think both of the educations that I got from [the community college] and [the University] really taught me how to embrace healthcare, and how to navigate and come up with creative ideas to help with my personal goals.

In this particular instance, the participant perceived his education at both the community college and baccalaureate level provided a foundation for him to have a better appreciation for his career field.

For the participants of this study, initial success helped pave the way for future success. This not only helped them navigate the transition from college drop-out or non-starter to community college entrant, but also helped them successfully navigate the transition from community college completer to four-year institution starter, and ultimately, completer there as well. In addition, it was not surprising to learn that all five participants have either entered into graduate school or are in process of applying to graduate schools. These participants as students, who were focused with a strong inner drive and with the help of a few outside influences, were able to achieve and maintain a pattern of persistence and success.

Additional Findings

Student Experiences of Success Themselves as Inspirational to Others

A successful student story can be viewed as good in itself. It validates an accomplishment for that person – a reason to celebrate a victory for that person in that point in
time. It validates an accomplishment for that person – a reason to celebrate a victory for that person in that point in time. Perhaps most importantly, it can include serving as an inspiration to others, so they can follow in similar successful footsteps. Stories of student success can also be of value to potential students or future students, including children:

Robert: My family of course, they are blown away that I was so far down, and got to be at the level that I'm at right now. It showed how much I did not give up on them. I think that's something that I hear from them all the time. Especially when my daughter told during her prom to one of her friends that, "This is my dad. The man who doesn’t take no for an answer, and he always survives, and comes back." I guess she had conversations with her friends [including this friend]... That was the moment that I said whatever I'm doing, it's worth it because it is definitely rubbing off on my family.

In this example, the participant’s student success is valued not only by his own children, but to other children (i.e. his daughter’s friends). In addition, the participant understood he could be inspirational to himself at the same time he was inspiring others. Thus, the positive influence of family can be reciprocal – in this case the father inspiring his children while his children are inspiring him. The father described a driving force to be successful so as to be a good role model for his family; his family was also inspired and encouraged the father to reach his goals.

In addition, individual student success can generally highlight the importance of pursuing a four-year degree as well as just being involved in pursuing higher education-related goals. This was augmented by a good support group around the student, encouraging and empowering the student:
Natalie: I feel like everybody should be encouraged to get an education because that's what helps you prosper and further your life. I don’t think a lot of people realize that. When you have people around you who are saying you're smart. You can do this. It's not hard and whatever. I feel like it's encouraging where you’re “okay you know what? You're right, I can do this.”

This notion of pursuing an educational goal as good in itself was seen as important to the student. This underscored the importance of the positive reinforcement of others as helping her validate her ability to succeed.

One student in particular during the interview process was able to capture student success as inspirational to others rather insightfully:

Tina: I brought my best friend with me this weekend, and she brought her brother. They're both twenty four, twenty five. They're fairly young. He's from a small town in Wisconsin. He just got his Associate's degree, but he said going to the graduation and seeing that someone my age, in the nicest way he could put it, completed what I did and became the valedictorian, or class marshal, or whatever, was a very inspirational thing for him, and he kept feeling like there wasn't enough time. He's already twenty three, twenty four, his words, and he's already that age, and he doesn't know if he has time. I said, "You just told a nearly-forty-year-old woman that you don't have time to finish your degree." He laughed.
It was interesting that someone that young would find an inspiration in someone older finishing their degree. I told him, "You've got all the time in the world to do this. You're not married, you don't have kids, it's the best time to do it."

To embrace that, I hope that people my age, in my circumstance, are helping others to realize that there's so much you need to do before you get your life started. Maybe it's just a cautionary tale at this point, I hope. I thought it was neat that he found it inspirational, and it made him start looking at other possibilities than just going to the college right next door. I thought that was neat.

This seems to be a moment of embracing student success at its best – beneficial and life-changing for the successful student and serving as inspirational to others. It is the ultimate lead-by-example moment for the successful student, for if they can do it (especially despite obstacles in the way) surely others can follow in their footsteps. And, while this single story accentuated just how influential the success of one person could be on another, it underscores a philosophy of being a difference-maker for others. For if this single student success story could be inspirational to a best friend’s brother, it could certainly be just as inspirational to other students who are following a similar starting point or other point along the journey.

**Attractiveness of University Offerings/Resources/Opportunities**

Participants at varying times pointed to a host of items that attracted them to the institution and an online format – serving to pave a clearer path for them to pursue, and ultimately complete, their four-year degree. Not surprisingly, cost and flexibility of program was mentioned on several occasions:
**Tina:** Low tuition, and also the fast track [cohort-model, degree completion program] was what sold me on [the University], because I wanted it done as soon as possible.

**Robert:** I was very good in sciences. I guess second calling you might say. Then I went to [the University] because I wanted to finish off the bachelors in healthcare management.

**Peggy:** I looked and looked and I saw that [the University] offered this [part-time, online] program.

Moreover, quality of institution/program was seen as important:

**Tina:** I realized there were a lot of reputable colleges online. I decided to go to [the University]. I really wanted to go to a reputable college. I spent probably six or seven months making an Excel spreadsheet of all the colleges, then going and looking at their rankings, looking at reviews. I'm really big about making sure that I'm purchasing the correct thing. I ended up with [the University]. It was the most affordable, most reputable of the list.

Once at the institution and in the program, student services were seen as important at varying levels among several participants:

**Valerie:** I think that the school being supportive and helping you along your way is priceless. I told you before that I had a great advisor. Everybody that I came in contact with. They want to see you attain your goal. Which makes it easier for you. You know that somebody's on your side. You're not sitting here by yourself.
Through a collection of pieces of the participant interviews, it was found that the institution itself and what it had available for some participants offered a solid foundation and clearer path to re-engage with their academic goals. These availabilities included cost, institutional reputation, online course and program format, degree program choice, online availability, and support from academic advising and other institutional resources. Each of these speaks to a factor in deciding to enter a degree program, and, ultimately persist with that program.

Faculty Support

Faculty support for one or more participants at varying levels included one or more of the following: flexible deadlines, variety of delivery options (e.g. lecture, video, audio, open-book exams, group work), real-world applications/examples, a mentoring/encouraging attitude, and extra help opportunities. Each of these items on their own were noteworthy, if for some but not necessarily all participants. Faculty support included help in understanding the course material, guidance on how to absorb and understand material, or provide an ease of transition/supportive environment to learn and grow as a student. Faculty members overall were seen as helpful to individual participants for differing reasons during the course associated with the faculty member, and continuing as inspiration after the course was over. Some were adept at pushing the individual as a student in their course, while others resonated with them on a more personal level:

**Peggy:** I keep going back to [name withheld], she was [had] a very positive attitude reassuring, no answer is a wrong answer, got you to really open up. She knew how to respond back to you with a positive answer but yet giving you some feedback that was constructive.
*Tina:* As I went through [the University], there are a couple of professors also that have really forced me to do better... Because at certain points along the way I knew I could do better, but I was already doing better, so I didn't need to try any harder. These people forced me to do even better. Attempt things and reach heights that I didn't think I could.

For these participants, faculty support was beneficial not only for that particular course, but in future courses taught by other faculty. Support was seen as genuine, helpful, and as addressing needs (e.g. confidence boost, push to do more/be a better student), speaking to degree completion.

**Summary**

This chapter provided a description of findings drawn out through the interview process and analysis of the data. These findings were qualified and validated through verbatim quotes from each participant and through the identification of emergent themes. These direct quotes served as affirmation of the students’ perspectives in their words with respect to how they felt they succeeded. IPA as a methodology allowed for both a robust and thorough analysis of the data and identification of super-ordinate themes and additional findings.
Chapter Six: Discussion and Implications for Higher Education

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to conduct scholarly research on adult learner, campus-based community college students who continued on to attain their baccalaureate degrees online. The study narrates their starting point into higher education, their intended pathways, pathways actually taken, and experiences and obstacles along the way, to understand how and why they were successful in completing their degrees. Specifically, the purpose of this phenomenological analysis was to identify successful adult students’ understandings through their experiences that contributed to the completion of their baccalaureate degrees in an online environment following an entry point as a community college student. By studying these students who were actually successful, by examining their pathways, and by finding out how they succeeded, information was gained that can help higher education professionals better understand, engage, educate, and support community college entrants who sought to complete a four-year degree. Moreover, the study of success examples could help to identify clear needs in the areas of student engagement and student support services, either through augmentation of existing support systems or creation of new ones altogether for this particular, growing demographic (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Dixon, 2010; Education Advisory Board, 2015; Gallimore, 2017; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Jensen, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011). In addition, institutions and administrators alike could benefit by identifying or augmenting retention strategies, benefitting institutions and students alike.

Audience(s) That Could Benefit from the Research

By learning of success examples from students who did succeed and complete their degree, a number of student populations could benefit. Adult learner, online students with four-
year degree completion goals who began their studies at the community college level could benefit from the findings of this research study. The success examples studied are of students in this very category. As such it would stand to reason this population could relate well to those examples, identifying with both the challenges and ways challenges were conquered. Hearing examples and successful practices that closely relate to their own experiences could likely inspire this group to employ some of those successful practices found. This could take the form of either identifying this combined group as a focus for improved engagement/retention practices by institutions, or as examples for like students to aspire to or follow.

Other student groups outside this combined group could benefit. This could include groups not having all but having one or more of the characteristics examined in this study – for example online students, or non-traditional students, or students beginning at the community college level but desiring a four-year degree. These groups might be motivated by one or more of the practices found. The same could be said of groups without the specific characteristics studied (traditional-aged students or on-campus students for example). That is, a study such as this might encourage any or all student groups to succeed in some way or form. Combined student groups and any of these sub-groups could benefit from a study such as this as a means to either help move the needle for institutions to employ/augment student engagement, or to inspire he students themselves to persist and succeed.

Finally, institutions and the administrators who run them – admissions, advising, faculty, support staff, student affairs professionals – can benefit from the themes and related findings a study such as this. In addition to the reasons mentioned above, research findings such as these can serve as partial research/affirmation to support policy change, changes to advising practices, or shifts in student/institutional culture. By looking at success examples in general,
administrators can reinforce or showcase these positive examples to serve as role modeling for students. Moreover, the study of how individual students succeeded can help to identify clear needs in specific areas of student engagement and student support services, either by augmenting existing support systems or creating new ones altogether, provided a larger pattern emerges from further studies. In addition, institutions and administrators can benefit by identifying any potential additional retention practices (i.e. creation of social media-based study groups, posting their picture in the introduction of a course to build community), benefitting institution and student alike. That is, as many institutions rely upon models of retention to promote student persistence, this study can be included to add to existing literature on the topic.

**Discussion**

**The Online Format**

The online format was one area of particular interest and focus for this study. Participants in the interviews, however, did not discuss the online format as a prime factor to their success. Participants instead noted a number of factors that contributed to their ultimate success. In addition to the five emergent themes and other findings, the online format, academic quality of the online program and of the institution, and cost to attend the institution were all important at some level to the participants as they made their decisions regarding their choice of their specific four-year institution. The road to the four-year institution was not always straight and narrow. Nonetheless, each participant understood that the successful transition from community college to the online format at a four-year institution was necessary to their successful pursuit of a baccalaureate degree. Participants noted they took time to research the institution that best fit their needs and chose the online format because it offered flexibility and
convenience, and chose an institution which had high-quality online programs at a reasonable cost. Thus, it can be considered as a factor, but not necessarily a critical factor.

However, despite some common agreement on the benefits of an online format degree pursuit as well as benefits of being older/wiser with respect to returning as adult learner students, these facts in themselves were not stressed as being as important in comparison with other factors found in terms of contributing to overall persistence and success. Nonetheless, the significance of choosing an online format is still worth noting, as this format afforded the opportunity for participants to make the transition from community college to four-year institution. Without the online format, it is highly possible these participants would not have returned to schooling, or would have deferred their schooling, or would have faced a much more difficult obstacle in returning to schooling. The online format, in reviewing the participant interviews and data gathered therein, offered a level of convenience but was not mentioned significantly enough to be considered as an emergent theme. Further research isolating the online format and its significance to student success in completing a baccalaureate, could provide interesting and insightful further discussion.

Themes

The emergent themes (inner drive, influence of family/friends, institutional support, specific person/event, success paving the way to future success) transcended the fact the participants happened to be adult learner in an online baccalaureate environment. Possibly, these emergent themes are more prevalent or more highly influential when examining this subset of students (adult learner, online students) in comparison with other subsets of students.

Themes and the Conceptual Framework
Inner-drive or self-motivation as a prime factor to their ultimate success. The observations of the participants concerning their own inner drive as central to their success in part supports the work of researchers who indicated that a student’s intent to complete a course or program (i.e. motivation) was an important factor to persisting and succeeding (Stavredes & Herder, 2014). Each of the participants pointed to their own self-motivation as a critical component in their quest to complete their four-year degree. Each of the participants indicated that the inner desire had to be there to be successful, a key piece missing the first time they entered a college-level environment. Researchers (Billings, 1988; Seiler & Billings, 2004; Stavredes & Herder, 2014) factored in other variables that affected student persistence and success, but their foundations also acknowledged a student’s intent or motivation to be successful. The participants in this study additionally acknowledged both opportunities and challenges to their persistence that researchers spoke of, such as family and employment status (Billings, 1988; Seiler & Billings, 2004; Stavredes & Herder, 2014). Notwithstanding, each participant also reinforced the notion they had ultimate control over whether or not they could be successful or not, and moved (through self-motivation or inner drive) to get there.

The writings of Astin (1977, 1984, 1985) also support the participants’ focus on inner drive. Astin found that the student played a critical role with respect to his/her persistence and success. The more involved a student became in his/her academic experience, the more likely they were to be successful. To Astin, “student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to an academic experience” (Astin, 1984, p. 297). Thus, the ultimate marker of success as far as the participants were concerned depends on the individual student’s ability to self-motivate and become integrated/invested in the institution. Astin (1977, 1984, 1985) placed a heavy importance on a student’s involvement as a prime
factor towards persistence and success, understanding a student has much control over their path. This theory is supported by the participant interviews; each understood and articulated the fact it was up to them to step up and complete courses/finish their degrees.

**Influence of family and friends as motivators to succeed and persist.** All of the participants pointed to family and friends as important towards their ultimate success. This took on many levels and forms, including direct and indirect assistance as well as specific and general support. This finding also supports the work of Billings (1988) as well as Tinto (1975, 1993), who indicated that a variety of factors including family and friends could be a positive impact on a student’s ability to persist and succeed. This was especially true in the case where a family member or friend had already succeeded with attaining their academic goals – and provided encouragement and support. Bean and Metzner (1985) spoke of outside encouragement as an important influence on student persistence and success (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Holst, 2007; McGivney, 2009). Moreover, they found that non-traditional aged students tended to be more heavily influenced by external environmental factors such as outside encouragement than their traditional-aged counterparts (Holst, 2007; McGivney, 2009; Sanders, 2008). Although this study did not include traditional-aged students, all participants pointed to family/friends as important, which is in line with Bean and Metzner (1985).

**Overall institutional support as fostering success/creating clear pathways to success.** Participants pointed to overall institutional support as important to the successful completion of their degree-seeking goals. Some specific examples were given with respect to important resources – a faculty member, an academic advisor, a course, an academic resource. Mostly, however, participants pointed to a more general area, speaking of how the institution as a whole was supportive of their quest for a degree. This supports Astin’s (1977, 1984, 1985) theory of
involvement, and in specific the notion that the more involved academically and socially a student is with an institution, the more likely he/she will be successful at that institution (Berger & Milem, 1997, 1999; Berger & Lyons, 2005; McGivney, 2009; Milem & Berger, 1997). This is an area in which institutions could assist students to become more involved through openness, interactive programming, and providing opportunities (Education Advisory Board, 2015; Noel-Levitz, 2011, 2015). The institution needs to be proactively involved with the student and the student needs to be proactively involved with the institution. The notion of an institution as creating a culture of support through its individual parts is a powerful one as pointed out by Astin (1977, 1984, 1985). If a student has a positive experience in one area, and then another, and then another, chances are good the student would be likely to reach out more and more deeply in the future, creating better integration and engagement with that institution (Harper, 2012; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012; Noel-Levitz, 2015). All participants commented on the support of the University as beneficial to their success in individual courses as well as in their overall degree pursuit.

**Specific person or event at the institution as inspirational/impactful.** While the participants all pointed to a specific person or event as inspirational, there was not much mention of this from the theorists in this study’s conceptual framework. Bean and Metzner (1984, 1985) do mention outside encouragement as part of one of their environmental variables as a reason why persistence or drop-out could occur (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Holst, 2007; McGivney, 2009). Tinto (1975, 1993, 20001, 2005, 2012) also mentions a specific outside event being a possible positive contributing factor to student persistence and success. Also, several researchers did recognize that success in one course allowed for a tendency for students to be successful in future courses (Billings, 1988; Seiler & Billings,, 2004; Stavredes & Herder, 2014). This is
consistent with participants speaking of a specific course or instructor or event that served as a pivotal point and/or catalyst to their path of persistence and success.

**Success paving the way for more success.** Participants often pointed towards earning good grades in earlier courses as a motivating factor to persisting and succeeding in later courses. This is consistent with Tinto (1975, 1993) who found that academic grades can be a measurement of success to the point where they promote persistence. In addition, several theorists (Astin, 1977, 1984, 1985; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Billings, 1985; Tinto, 1975, 1993) pointed to a tendency that the more successful the student is initially, the better the chances the student will continue to be successful in the future. Specifically Billings (1988) found that students who submitted assignments earlier had greater rates of persistence than students who submitted assignments later. Students with higher overall grade point averages and familiarity with the online format enjoyed better fellow student support and also tended to persist at a greater rate (McGivney, 2009; Stavredes & Herder, 2014). In addition, Billings found that when students were successful in a course, they tended to be more likely to be successful in future courses (Billings, 1988; Stavredes & Herder, 2014).

**Themes and the Literature Review**

**Inner-drive or self-motivation as a prime factor to their ultimate success.** Although there exist many external opportunities to promote student success, the role of individual students themselves as a critical determining factor of their own success cannot be overlooked. Literature supports the notion that students themselves are vital to their own success (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Dixon, 2010; Education Advisory Board, 2015; Gallimore, 2017; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Jensen, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011). From the student
perspectives, a dominant influential factor was student him/herself. All of the resources can be made available, all of the support from friends and family can be present, financial obstacles can be removed (Education Advisory Board, 2015; Gallimore, 2017; Noel-Levitz, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011. And, in many cases, the students themselves can be properly prepared in pre-college schooling and possess the intellectual skills to be academically successful at the college/university level. Nonetheless, the students themselves need both the desire to want to succeed and to take action towards those academic goals. The inner desires and motivations of the individual students themselves have to be strong. Even the most gifted students with all the advantages possible still have to want to do the work necessary to complete their coursework and eventually their degree. Several students in the study were originally accepted by good, four-year colleges/universities as a traditional-aged high school senior. That is, several had good opportunities early but for whatever reason were not ready for college. A series of life circumstances eventually brought them to a place where they decided they had to move forward with their degree completion goals. Financial and career factors were important, outside influences were helpful, institutions themselves provided opportunities and resources. In the end, however, the students themselves decided for themselves they were going to be committed to finish their degree, to overcome obstacles through their own energy and inner drive to succeed.

This need to be self-motivated and/or driven to succeed extends itself to a need for self-seeking opportunities for external resources (fellow students, college administration and resources, financial resources, family/friends) to be of benefit. That is, students will need to be willing to integrate into the higher educational culture – critical factors for Tinto (1975, 1993), Astin (1977, 1984, 1985), and Bean & Metzner (1985) – in order to be successful. Astin
believed the more involved a student became with an institution, the more likely the student would persist/succeed at that institution (Berger & Milem, 1997, 1999; Berger & Lyons, 2005; McGivney, 2009; Milem & Berger, 1997). This involvement, though it can be pushed by the institution, still has to be supported by the student. That is, the student has to embrace and “run with it” through self-motivation.

Influence of family and friends as motivators to succeed and persist. All participants in the study pointed to family and friends as important support people to inspire success. The inspiration was two-way. That is, family and friends inspired the individual, and the individual inspired their family and friends. Family and friends were inspired by both the attempt by the individual at success such as going back to school, managing multiple responsibilities to stay in school; and by successes along the way such as successfully completing coursework and moving forward. When they saw the individual succeed, it made them happy as well (and vice-versa). Thus, family and friends were able in some way to share in the individual’s success. At the same time, the individual participants felt an obligation or desire to be a positive role model for their family and friends. Sometimes, it meant not wanting to let their family or friends down by failing. Certainly, fear of failure can work well at times. Mostly, however, individuals were motivated to succeed because they wanted to be a positive role model to those close to them. Family/friends also were important to either take on extra responsibilities to free up time for the student, or to generally be aware and supporting that the student had less time to give to them.

The literature supported the study with respect to the importance of family/friends as vital to the overall success of the student (Aslanian, 2001; Bundy, 2004; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Adult learners typically have families, including children, and coupled with their age have more numerous experiences/influences in comparison to other student groups (Bundy, 2004; Jacobs &
Hundley, 2010; Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Zacharakis, Steichen, de Sabates, & Tanewski, 2011). Family and friends can be both supportive – helping with life responsibilities, offering encouragement, or distracting – obligations/distractions (Aslanian, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 2011). For the participants of the study, they reported instances of support and positive influence.

**Overall institutional support as fostering success/creating clear pathways to success.**

The research literature often pointed to institutional support as critical to student success, especially as it applied to student engagement (Harper & Quaye, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students who are engaged are more likely to be happy with their educational pursuits, be positive representations/models for the institution, and earn higher grades than students who are not engaged (Harper & Quaye, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012). In this study, each of the participants pointed to an overall positive feeling with respect to the institution that supported them and helped them be successful and persist.

Tinto’s Student Integration Model (1975, 1993) validates the notion of integration as supporting retention and persistence, which leads to graduation/program completion. Bean and Metzner (1985) also emphasize the importance of academic and social integration of the student into college/university experiences in order to improve student persistence/success (Myran, 2009). Institutions can and should try to integrate students academically socially into the college/university experience. At the same time, the student him/herself must be willing to at least acclimate into the college/university experience. This includes academic (how to study, manage time, take exams, write academic papers) and social (form study groups, interact with faculty and fellow students, utilize institutional resources, become involved) factors. This is
critical according to Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012). A student is more likely to persist and be successful if the student becomes successfully integrated into the institution. Integration must be both academic and social in nature, so that the student experiences both an academic and social commitment from the institution (Jensen, 2011; Tinto 1975, 1999, 2005, 2012; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). A feeling of belonging and a feeling of investment from the institution towards the student is necessary for an atmosphere of success.

Although Tinto’s theory and integration model focused on traditional-aged, campus-based students, adult learner, online students also validate Tinto with respect to adult learner, online student integration – social and academic – as needed to promote success and persistence. Though this group of students might not experience the institution in ways traditional-aged, campus-based students do, they nonetheless often need to feel a part of the student experience to promote their own student success. For the participants in this study, support from the institution was felt and experienced, both on an academic and a social level – and participants from their own words and experiences reiterated the positive influence of social and academic integration. This support was touched upon at the community college level but felt throughout their student experience at the four-year institution level. Specifically, participants pointed to individual instances or persons influential in promoting integration at the community college level. At the four-year institution level, this integration was more prevalent and continuous, transcending a single person or department or resource. Researchers focusing on either distance education or adult learner student experiences (Billings, 1988; Education Advisory Board, 2015; McGivney, 2009; Sieler & Billings, 2004) support the participant experiences in this study. Given the physical distance from the institution for many students, coupled with the lack of in-person interaction with departments/administrators, literature spoke about institutions looking to support
students in alternative formats (e-mail, online chat, videoconferencing) to be available and accessible for students (Aslanian, 2001; Education Advisory Board, 2015; Noel-Levitz, 2011, 2015). In addition, as the participants confirmed, feeling welcome or valued by the institution is important to keeping students engaged and retained (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012; Noel-Levitz, 2011, 2015).

**Specific person or event at the institution as inspirational/impactful.** For the participants, often a specific person or event was seen as a catalyst that catapulted them along in their degree pursuit. The positive impact of a specific person or event was often documented in the interviews of the participants. Some students even used each other as inspiration.

The literature makes little if any mention of specific persons or events as critical to student persistence and success in the way the participants mention it. The literature instead points to general aspects of the institution (faculty, advising, financial aid, curriculum development) as areas needed to support/inspire students and not the specific (individual faculty member, student’s assigned advisor, etc.). Thus, the literature tends to support a more general need to transform resources, services, and programs to better serve the growing population of adult, online learners (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Bundy, 2004; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Davidson & Goldberg, 2009; Dixson, 2010; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Maehl, 2000; Mehrotra et al, 2001; Noel-Levitz, 2011; Pappas & Jerman, 2004; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Rovai et al, 2008; Shelton, 2010; United States Department of Education, 2011). Research has explored institution-wide (macro) sources and as such does not include this type of support that can come from an individual (micro) source.
**Success paving the way for more success.** Success for students is often measured in grading. Thus, it should come as no surprise that students with higher overall grades also tended to persist at a greater rate (McGivney, 2009; Stavredes & Herder, 2014). Success can also be measured in just passing an individual course, or moving forward with decent grades. That is, a student does not necessarily need a grade of A to be successful or motivated to move on; they can persist through the successful completion of a course in itself. Moreover, success even in a part of a course or a single assignment could be significant toward additional successes. For the participants in the study, it was less important exactly what the individual success was, but rather the participants indicated that it was success in itself that was inspirational towards additional successes. Each success created a feeling that more successes were attainable, inevitable.

**Discussion of the Other Findings**

According to the Educational Advisory Board (2015), “the three most important considerations for adult and online learners continue to be convenience and flexibility of offerings, financial assistance and affordability, and the academic reputation and outcomes of the institution” (p.5). This is consistent between participant interviews and research literature. Participants noted the importance of cost, financial aid eligibility, quality of program, program format, and course/program delivery as factors in both deciding to complete their four-year degree and actually going out and completing it. In addition, “it’s not enough to just be successful; a program needs to make sure current and prospective students know that the program can help them succeed” (Education Advisory Board, 2015, p. 8). Adult learner, online students who want a four-year degree but start out at a community college often have additional, difficult obstacles to overcome to earn a four-year degree. It is increasingly important to engage
and support this population of students and equip them with resources to give them the best opportunities to be successful.

A number of initiatives could serve to better engage and serve adult, online learners. Based upon the participant interviews/analysis as well as the literature reviewed, institutions could be well-served to:

- **Provide high quality, career-relevant programs.** This means offering programs of the highest standard and aligning with workforce demands. This involves assessing academic programs and learning outcomes – so they can adapt and change to keep pace with market needs. It also means creating access to new technologies to augment the learning experience – teaching tools, affinity groups, and institutional resources.

- **Encourage open access and easy navigation of higher educational systems - admissions, registrar, financial aid, academic advising, career services, library resources, faculty.** Allow for 24/7 access to library resources and assistance. Allow physical access to libraries for online students who can visit them in-person. Offer free, 24/7, online and phone (in-person for online students who can visit them in-person), easy-to-access tutoring services. Provide podcast or videos explaining resources and how to use those resources. Run seminars or workshops on academic integrity, how to conduct research, how to write research papers, and how to improve writing skills.

- **Allow for multiple methods of instruction from faculty, including teaching methods, delivery of instruction, and problem-solving strategies.** Offer lectures in print as well as audio/video format. Present lessons in multiple ways. This includes bringing real-world examples to augment theories/concepts, presenting course materials under multiple
formats, and celebrating collaborative efforts, both among students and between student
and instructor. Allow for timely, open feedback so students do not feel lost or left
behind. Be available online, phone, and via e-mail (or in-person for online students who
can visit in-person) to assist, mentor, and coach students – both those struggling and
those performing well.

- **Provide multiple financing options and flexibilities, including federal financial aid
  and payment plans. In addition, offer multiple student support systems – including
  academic advising, career planning, and life coaching.** Offer scholarships specific to
  adult learner, online students. Create financial incentives for student persistence (e.g.
  benefit for registering early). Designate specific persons rather than department referrals
  (e.g. designated financial aid counselor, designated academic advisor, designated career
  coach). Make accessing resources intuitive and user-friendly. Proactively reach out to
  students to bring resources to them via podcasts, interactive workshops, and
  weekly/monthly newsletters. Regularly check in with students to ensure they are on-
  track and utilizing resources/integrating with the institution.

**Implications for Professional Practice**

Ideas and suggestions that emerged from this research study emphasized the need to
provide students who start out at a community college with user-friendly tools and access
opportunities as a way to promote student success. The online format, while certainly useful to
students with respect to convenience and accessibility, was not a cure-all but rather a smaller
factor/part of their student success. Other factors, such as inner drive and success fostering more
success, were much larger, key factors towards reaching their baccalaureate completion goals.
The following were found to be important in order to better support online, adult learner (who begin at a community college starting point but ultimately desire a baccalaureate) student success:

**Course Format and Delivery Options**

Flexibility of course format and delivery were a consistent finding in the data. Course format and delivery for this study were defined as not only an online format but also length of time to complete the course, how the course was set up for students to complete, and how the course was taught. Course format and delivery ideas and suggestions included offering both full-term and half-term options, instruction via multiple modes (written, audio, video) as well as multiple, portfolio-style assignment responsibilities (written assignments, discussion boards, blogs, video or electronic presentations, reflective assignments, tests, or other learning activities). Fast-track (completing a program in a quicker set amount of time), cohort model (same group of students follow through an entire program) formats and deliveries were also widely mentioned. This would allow for students to easily form study groups or affinity groups. In addition, this format provides a clear path of what courses are needed and in which order to complete the degree.

**Academic Advising**

Academic advising was included by participants as a positive factor toward their success. Their ideas included a desire for opportunities to be student-centric, accessible, and welcoming. Online and written (catalogs, handbooks, and other resources) should be robust and easy to access, but should not replace personal, one-to-one contact between advisor and advisee. Contact with one’s academic advisor should be regular and interactive. A regular, collaborative
and interactive approach promotes a clear vision of the student’s goals, steps needed or an action plan to achieve those goals, and a clear timeline to meet those goals. Interwoven is support/guidance in building those skills necessary to meet goals – time management, study skills, self-advocacy, academic planning, career planning. Students who have a working relationship with their academic advisor can have a greater rate of persistence and success than those who do not utilize this resource. Academic advisors can also coach, inspire, or guide students along their path, acting as an additional support system to their success.

Financial Aid

It was not surprising to learn from the participants that cost was a major factor during their degree path, and the online format (both cost of courses as well as convenience in not having to travel to campus) helped mitigate stress related to program cost. Participants desired to have additional or deeper financial-based options available to them. Participants wished to promote a better relationship by designating a specific financial aid advisor to online students. If possible, participants desired a single application for all institutional scholarships – so the student does not need to decipher the scholarships for which he/she is eligible.

Building Affinity/Community

Working with fellow students and hearing their stories of success built confidence for all for the participants. Building connections with other students for them improved their satisfaction and increased student engagement. Building affinity/community can take place from two sources – student-initiated and institution-initiated. Institutions can initiate and/or support clubs/organizations specific to this population, or encourage students to join existing student groups. Requiring students to work in groups as well as peer-review of assignments allows
students to work collaboratively and share work/life experiences. Active faculty interaction also supports institutional affinity and connection. For online courses especially, posting a bio and picture helps fellow students gain insight of a student’s personality and backstory, increasing opportunities for collegiality and friendships in and outside of the classroom. Several participants mentioned initiating study groups (Facebook and other) outside of the classroom as a means of helping each other persist through individual courses and the program as a whole.

It is also important, as Astin (1984) would agree, for a two-way street of institution and student to be involved to fully contribute to student success. Participants often noted specific and general instances where institutional support, real or generally felt, contributed to their overall success. Participants spoke of how an institution as a whole was supportive of their quest for a degree. Subsequently, the notion of an institution as creating a culture of support through its individual parts is a powerful one. If a participant had a positive experience in one area, and then another, and then another, chances were the participant would be engaged and successful. And, based on the interviews, this phenomenon carried through for each of them.

**Implications for Further Research/Future Research Possibilities**

Future researchers may further explore student persistence from a success point of view (i.e. why students succeed as opposed to why they drop-out). Plenty of literature exists to explain and suggest alternatives to combat drop-out), but not enough literature supports models of persistence and success. Future research would support a more balanced body of literature. This future research could prove important; by hearing of student success stories and why these students perceived they succeeded, other existing and future students and student populations
could benefit. Institutions could additionally benefit from these stories, as they could serve to help institutions better retain and engage students.

Future research possibilities could include studies that address the differences (if any) among different student groups related to their success (e.g. traditional-aged, full-time residential students, traditional-aged, full-time commuter students, first generation students). While this study did include participants of differing ages, ethnic backgrounds, military status, and other identifiers, future research possibilities could be conducted to isolate a particular category of student. Future studies could target the online format to determine the impact on overall success for adult learner students. Conversely, adult learner students could be isolated to see which format best promoted success, or is something particular about their adult learner status (work/life experience, financial investment, or other factors, a critical advantage to their ultimate success. Future studies could also be conducted to target faculty, staff, and other administrators to compare their perceptions of the lived experiences of the successful students in this study. Future studies could isolate individual factors of success (e.g. inner drive, family/friends) either as a means of comparison at a micro level (i.e. to study the value/impact of each factor to student success) or at a macro level (i.e. against other studies). In addition, future research could target program delivery formats (i.e. accelerated degree completion options in comparison with take-courses-as-you-go options) to analyze factors/correlations and if so to what extent between time to complete a degree and rates of success for students in that particular format.

Implications for Others

By studying these students who were successful and by gaining an understanding as to how and why they think they succeeded, patterns to better engage, educate, and support this
ever-increasing student population (and to differing extents, other student populations) can be uncovered (Harper, 2012; Johnson, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2012, 2016). Students and institutions/administrators alike could benefit from studying these students.

Conclusion

All too often in higher education, the focus is on the negative – why students fail, why dreams are not fulfilled. Higher education often does not actually ask students not only why they may be floundering, but also what tools/resources might be helpful to facilitate their success. Instead, higher education institutions try to figure this out for students without often actually asking successful students and graduates themselves what they thought was critical to their ultimate success. The purpose of this study was to hear success examples from the students who lived them, and focus on their own interpretations of the significance and meaning of their stories. By studying these students who were actually successful, by examining their pathways, and by finding out how they succeeded, information was gained that can help higher education professionals better understand, engage, educate, and support community college entrants who seek to complete a four-year degree in an online setting.

After conducting a thorough literature review and initiating a multi-layered, three-instance interview process, it was found that participants’ perceptions on how and why they succeeded did resemble a number of the same factors discussed in the literature. What makes this study significant is not only does it add to a relatively scarce amount of literature analyzing why students succeed (as opposed to why they fail), but also because it provides information from the participants’ perspectives. These participant interviews at a basic level serve as validation of the participants’ hard work and dedication to completing their goals. At a more
integrated level, they serve as inspiration to themselves (all five participants are either pursuing a
master’s degree or are applying to graduate school) and to others – family, friends, colleagues,
fellow students, and future students.

This study also has significance because it identified five themes that add to the literature
and inform professionals on ideas that can be used to better support student success. These
themes were:

- **Inner drive or self-motivation as a prime factor to their ultimate success**
- **Influence of family and friends as motivators to succeed and persist**
- **Overall institutional support as fostering success/creating clear pathways to success**
- **Specific person or event at the institution as inspirational/impactful**
- **Success paving the way for more success**

Additional findings to support student success were also identified - student experiences of
success themselves as inspirational to others, attractiveness of university
offerings/resources/opportunities, and faculty support. The online format, while providing an
important level of flexibility for participants, was not significant enough in the data to be
considered as ultimately critical to their overall success.

For the participants of this study, initial success helped pave the way for future success.
It not only helped them navigate the transition from college drop-out or non-starter to community
college entrant, but also helped them successfully navigate the transition from community
college completer to four-year institution starter, and ultimately, completer online as an adult
learner at a four-year institution. In addition, it was not surprising to learn that all five
participants have either entered into graduate school or are in process of applying to graduate schools. These participants as students, once focused with a strong inner drive and with the help of outside influences, were able to achieve and maintain a pattern of persistence and success.

As the number increases regarding adult-learner, online baccalaureate seekers who began at the community college level, finding out why these students succeed and gaining ideas as to how to better support future students of this subset becomes ever-more important. In addition, greater research on the persistence of students could counterbalance existing overall research on drop-out, providing more optimism in the process. As institutions look to the future, studies such as these will become increasingly important to help best serve not only this student population, but other populations as well. Higher education institutions own a great responsibility to provide their students with the best opportunities to succeed – and it just makes good business sense for them as well. College administrators in both four year and community colleges should take note of stories such as these, share them with others if at all possible, and help remove obstacles.

In the end, as the participants in this study confirmed, the ultimate responsibility for actualizing degree completion goals lies with the individual. Ultimately, the students themselves will need to step up, do the work necessary, and earn their own success. Institutions and administrators can assist by paving a smoother road through streamlined and user-friendly resources. Institutions and administrators can guide students to self-actualize and self-advocate, and challenge students to take ownership of their education. Institutions and administrators can hire and cultivate faculty, provide innovative and career-relevant programs, and offer multiple learning opportunities and formats. Institutions and administrators can additionally showcase stories of success. That is, if enough people tell a student they can be successful, and some
people show a student that/how they were successful, that student will believe he/she can be successful as well. The stakes are high – but so too are the rewards.
References


*Journal of College Student Personnel. 25*, 297-308.


Clark, B. (1980). The “cooling-out” function revisited, In G. Vaughan (Ed.).  


Tinto, V. & Pusser, B. (2006). Moving From Theory to Action: Building a Model of Institutional


Venezia, A., & Kirst, M. (2005). Inequitable opportunities: How current education systems and


Appendix A

IRB introduction memo to participants:

Greetings,

We are contacting you on behalf of [the University]. A student in the Doctor of Education program at [the University] is researching graduates who successfully completed a four-year degree (baccalaureate) and how and why they succeeded in completing their degree. In other words, this study is focused on student persistence and will seek out first-person perspective stories as a means to help higher education professionals better understand, engage, educate, and support students.

The student is also an administrator at [the University] and has been an employee of [the University] since 2001.

Specifically, the student is interested in researching online, adult learner (defined as age twenty-five or older) graduates who completed their degree from a community college starting point.

You have been contacted because you are a recent graduate of [the University]. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and University guidelines require that we ask you to self-select if you meet the criteria necessary for this study. You are under no obligation to respond to this message or participate in the study if you do not wish to respond/participate.

If are willing to self-select and

- You are an adult learner graduate
- You completed your degree online
- You began your studies at the community college level

you would qualify for this study.

Four to eight graduates (equal number of male/female graduates if possible) will be selected from the pool of students who agree to participate in the study.

If you are selected for this study, you will be asked to take part in three separate interviews, each approximately a week apart. Each interview session will take place at a place/time convenient and comfortable for you, and will include three to five open-ended questions. Each interview should take approximately thirty minutes to an hour. Each interview will take place via telephone.

If you agree and are selected to participate, you will be encouraged to provide as much detail as you feel comfortable in answering those questions. Your part in this study will be confidential.
Only the researchers on this study will see information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. A pseudonym will be used to conceal your identity.

Electronic data will be kept on an encrypted flash-drive. Signed consent documents will be kept in a hard copy file. All data will remain in a secure location (small safe) at my residence when not in use and otherwise kept at my residence when in use (when analyzing the data). Data and other materials will be destroyed in accordance with [the University’s] IRB Guidelines.

There are no anticipated risks or discomfort from participating in this study.

Participants will be asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview process. This consent form will also explain in detail the study, risks, and goals.

Should you agree to participate and are selected, the student will provide a nominal gift (Amazon $10 gift card) as a token of appreciation for participating in the study.

If you are interested in participating in this study and meet the criteria, please respond to [the Student Investigator’s e-mail contact] no later than April 15, 2016 at 6:00 PM EST. Participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not volunteer to participate, you will not be contacted again. Whether or not you volunteer, there will be no consequences regarding your status with [the University].

Should you have any questions regarding this study, your role, or anything related, please do not hesitate to contact [the Student Investigator/e-mail address] (Student Investigator) or [Principal Investigator/e-mail address] (Principal Investigator).

Regardless of your decision, thank you!
Appendix B

Telephone conversation script:

Thank you for participating in this study. You were chosen to participate in this study because as an adult learner student, you successfully completed your bachelor degree online at a four-year institution. Moreover, you successfully completed this degree from a community college starting point. By studying students like yourself, and more importantly by hearing your stories from your perspective, information can be gained to help higher education professionals better support community college entrants who seek a four-year degree as an online, adult learner student.

Please answer in as little or as much detail as you like with respect to each question. If you feel uncomfortable in answering any part or whole of a question, please feel free not to answer it. If at any time up to the end of the third set of interviews you wish to be removed from the study, you have the right to do so.

At any time during the interview process, should you have questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you for participating in this study!

(bEGIN ASKING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS)
Appendix C

Interview questions:

First Interview

Thank you for participating in this study. This is the first round of three interviews to learn more about student success. Specifically, how you perceive that you succeeded in earning your bachelor degree as an online, adult learner student and who began at a community college.

The purpose of the first interview is to gather basic background information about you – who you are and how you came to begin from a community college path and transition to completing your baccalaureate online as an adult learner student.

1) Please introduce yourself – tell us a little bit about who you are, your background, and how you came to pursue a higher educational degree.

2) Please talk a little about your influences – life experiences, work experiences, and experiences with family and friends. Specifically, what were these influences and to what extent did they influence your pursuit of a degree?

3) Tell me about your experiences with schooling up to and including high school. Were they good or lacking experiences? Were there any educators influential in your life? Did your schools have good resources or was something missing about them?

4) How did your study skills and desire to complete a college degree develop? Did you like school, feel school prepared you for a college experience?

Thank you for your participation in the first round of interviews. We will connect again next week at __________. I look forward to speaking with you at that time and continuing our conversation.
Second interview

Thank you for participating in this study. This begins the second round of interviews.

The purpose of the second interview is to gather more specific information, through your lived experiences, on the process of you succeeding as an online, adult learner student.

1) Tell us about your specific, lived experiences in succeeding. How do you perceive that you successfully navigated the path from a community college starting point? How did you succeed in completing your four-year degree?

2) What do you feel were the reasons why you succeeded? Let us know of any and all factors that contributed to your success?

3) How do you interpret your success? That is, from your perspective what meaning or significance do you find in your success? What lessons did you learn from your success?

4) Can you give specific examples of how you succeeded along the way? What factors do you perceive were important towards making these moments successful?

Thank you for your participation in the second round of interviews. We will connect again next week at __________. I look forward to speaking with you at that time and continuing our conversation.
Third Interview

Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of the third interview is to allow you to share any additional information you feel may have been missed or should be emphasized prior to the end of data collection.

1) Is there any question you wish you were asked prior to today’s interview? If so, what was that question and how would you have answered it?

2) Is there any additional information you would like to provide before we conclude the data collection process?

3) Reflecting on your college experience, what influences (if any) best helped you to succeed?

4) Are there any other, overall reflections you would like to share?

Thank you for participating in this study! Your part in this study is complete. All information will be kept confidential as explained prior and during your participation. Please accept my gratitude to you – by learning how and why you feel you succeeded, we can gain information to help higher education professionals better understand, engage, educate, and support community college entrants who seek to complete a four-year degree.

Congratulations on the completion of your undergraduate degree and thank you once again for your participation in this study.