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Non-Traditional Distance Learners: Student Persistence In A Rural Remote Community

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NON-TRADITIONAL DISTANCE LEARNERS: STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN A RURAL REMOTE COMMUNITY

by

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This dissertation, submitted by Paula A. Sundet Wolf in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

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5-1-12

Date

PERMISSION

Title	Non-Traditional Distance Learners: Student Persistence in a Rural Remote Community
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Paula A. Sundet Wolf
May 12, 2012

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ABSTRACT

Cook County Higher Education (CCHE), a non-profit distance education resource center located in rural northeastern Minnesota, has student completion rates of 90% and higher. CCHE has attributed the student persistence to its external support services, such as mentoring, technology support, study skills, attitude, and financial resources. With the national call for increased degrees per capita, there is also increased incentive for higher education institutions to become more creative in offering external support services to their non-traditional distance learning students. This grounded theory method research project explored rural students' perceptions of what motivates them to persist in distance learning programs. Thick, narrative responses were drawn from a focus group with current students, and individual interviews were conducted with students who had completed or withdrawn from degree programs. My rationale was premised on the assumption that providing support resources contributes to higher retention rates. Results from this study concluded that rural distance learners need a high level of support services from the learner's institution and local community to balance the extraordinary challenges they face due to their remote location and limited access to support services, and for rural distance learners to be successful, the instructor has to take a pro-active role in supporting his or her students.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Context of the Problem

Studies by Sloan and the Instructional Technology Council (ITC) have revealed that not only is online education on the rise, but the non-traditional student (age 24 or older) is becoming a more traditional sight on and off campuses (Allen & Seaman, 2010; ITC, 2010). Increased enrollment is particularly evident with online programs, which are growing at a much faster rate than on-campus enrollment (ITC, 2010). According to Minnesota State Colleges and Universities figures, over the past ten years on campus enrollment increased 19%, and online enrollment increased a whopping 1239% (Kohl, 2011). Much of this growth has been attributed to the national economic crisis (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Technological advances have resulted in online coursework and degrees that are offered entirely online, or are hybridized so that students have an opportunity to experience the college campus while still maintaining the demands of family and work. At the same time, completion rates continue to be a concern, especially for online courses. According to research, college completion rates across the nation range from 60% to 81%, and average only 74% (Rovai, 2002; Stuart, 2010). For some fields, such as engineering, completion rates are significantly lower: only 56% in the United States, and 62.85% in Australia (Gibbings, Godfrey, King, & Wandel, 2010). Recent information

from ACT shows an alarming decrease in overall graduation rates: as low as 28% for public two-year institutions, and the highest only 55% at private four-year institutions (ACT, 2011; Habley, Valiga, McClanahan, & Burkum, 2010). In addition, online course completion rates range from 20% to as much as 80% lower than for on-campus courses (Park & Choi, 2009; Pittenger & Doering, 2010).

A separate study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics claims that the completion rates are 64%, and while the specific numbers vary from study to study, the overall message is one of concern that there has been little to no improvement over the past ten years (Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, & Shepherd, 2010). This situation is not unique to the United States; research reveals similar low graduation rates and high attrition rates across the world, indicating that retention, especially for distance learning, is a global concern (Longden, 2006; Gibbings et al., 2010).

Cook County Higher Education

There are a few exceptions to the national average, and one of those is Cook County Higher Education (CCHE), a non-profit distance education resource center located in rural northeastern Minnesota that has 90% student completion rates. Cook County is a rugged wilderness bordered by Canada and Lake Superior. The county is half again the size of Rhode Island, but with a population of only 5,472. CCHE was established in 1996 as a unique alternative to a bricks-and-mortar institution because the community is too small to sustain a college campus. Prior to CCHE Cook County residents had to travel an average over 125 miles to the nearest college or university. Using a blend of technology and local professionals, CCHE collaborates with colleges and universities across the nation to bring high quality, accredited degree and certificate

programs to a community that would otherwise not be served. CCHE has attributed student persistence to the external support services CCHE provides, such as mentoring, technology support, study skills, and assistance seeking financial aid. Other than the high completion rate, however, CCHE has no explicit proofs of how these services increase students' retention.

CCHE works with individuals on a one-to-one basis to identify certificate and degree programs that fit individual student needs. Student tuition is paid directly to the institutions offering the course or degree program. As a result, CCHE receives no direct revenue from its clientele, 50% of whom are low-income single-parenting individuals living below the poverty level. CCHE operates on a modest budget of under $200,000 annually with two full time and two part time staff, and serves a broad range of clientele including adult learners with little to no college experience, to professionals seeking additional education or training for job advancement. Since CCHE opened its doors in 1997 over 500 residents have earned a certificate or degree from an accredited college or university. In 2011, 45 students completed their course of study and earned certificates or degrees resulting in increased employment or new careers with benefits.

Like the rest of the nation, CCHE has seen marked enrollment increases; in 2010 enrollment increased 57%, and in 2011 enrollment increased 20%. These are significant statistics for a small rural community. Recently the Obama administration called for an increase in per-capita degree achievement, with the goal of having "the highest proportion of college graduates in the world" by 2020 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2009). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2009), President Obama's plan for reformation:

> [Is] calling for an additional 5 million community college graduates by 2020 and new initiatives to teach Americans the skills they will need to compete with workers from other nations. He outlined new initiatives to increase the effectiveness and impact of community colleges, raise graduate rates, modernize facilities, and create new online learning opportunities. (p.1)

Economically, this initiative is timely. According to a 2010 report from the University Center on Education and the Workforce, postsecondary education has become an expected requirement in the job market, and the current rate of graduation will not be able to keep up with workforce needs (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). They report the following:

> By 2018 we will need 22 million new degrees, but will fall short of that number by at least 3 million postsecondary degrees, Associates or better. In addition, we will need at least 4.7 million new workers with postsecondary certificates. Our calculations show that America's colleges and universities would need to increase the number of degrees they confer by 10 percent annually, a tall order. (p. 1)

It is an accepted standard that a well-educated adult population is sound economics and provides positive social benefits to our communities (Bergevin, 1984). With the national call for increased degrees per capita, there is also increased incentive for higher education institutions to become more creative in offering external support services to their non-traditional off-campus learners.

Purpose of Study

Research has revealed that successful students are more likely to depend on several motivating factors for persisting in a degree program (Cross, 1981; Rovai, 2003; Wlodkowski, 1993). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore rural students' perceptions of what motivates them to persist in distance learning programs. Specifically, this grounded theory study asked students at CCHE why they are motivated to complete distance learning programs.

Research Questions

This grounded theory method research project explored rural students' perceptions of what motivates them to persist in distance learning programs. A grounded theory method was selected because it provided the most effective process for systematically yet flexibly "collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 2). This study explored the following research questions:

1. What motivates rural distance learning students to persist?
2. What support resources do rural distance learning students need to complete their course of study?

Results from this study could be used to implement distance learning support services in other rural communities, disseminate the information to other institutions in the hopes of increasing retention rates across the nation, and foster continued success for CCHE students. My rationale was premised on the assumption that providing support resources contributes to higher retention rates.

Theoretical Framework

Most of CCHE's students are non-traditional adult learners, and adult students bring a new equation to what motivates students to persevere. They have been away from the educational arena for five to twenty years and need to refresh their learning skills. A student's competence includes their readiness, study skills, and for online students their technological skills. According to researchers, improving competence increases motivation and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hall et al., 2007; Tsui, 2007).

A. Rogers (2002) identified three modes of education that adults experience: vocational (occupation driven), socially transformative, and personal growth. These three modes could also be defined as the "needs" of education. "The more strongly the person feels the need, the greater the chances the person will feel an accompanying pressure to attain the related goal" (Wlodkowski, 1993, p. 48). Adult students provide a myriad of reasons for choosing to further their education, such as economic, physical health, divorce, occupational changes and adjustment, dissatisfaction with current employment, and seeking fulfillment of life goals (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007).

There are several motivation models that have been implemented in higher education institutions for on-campus students. Most common are Tinto's (1975) student integration model, and Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model, which uses Tinto's model and applies it to students age 24 and older. Rovai (2003) took these two models and combined them in light of distance learning students to create a Composite Persistence Model (CPM) that considers students prior to admission (academic skills and student characteristics), external factors (student health, finances, and other factors beyond an institution's control), and internal factors (social integration, learning styles, and other aspects within an institution's control).

In addition to study skills, CCHE implements components of attributional retraining (AR). Haynes, Perry, Stupnisky, and Daniels (2009) state that AR is critical for first year students because, "AR is designed to enhance both perceived control and motivation, thereby assisting vulnerable, low-control students" (p. 232). According to Haynes et al., AR, "helps students reframe the way they think about success and failure

by encouraging them to take responsibility for academic outcomes and adopt the 'can-do' attitude" (p. 227).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is another important aspect of student perseverance. SDT includes the importance of belonging, of being connected and engaged, and relatedness (a reason for the learning) – critical motivators for adult students (Greene, 1984; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) define autonomy as the *feeling* connected to making learning decisions on your own. As they point out, "Support for autonomy allows individuals to actively transform values into their own" (p. 74). Adult students want their learning to be pertinent and applicable, and one of the best ways to achieve this is with application in the classroom. This actively engages adults to create a dynamic learning environment that will stimulate their attention and reinforce their learning experience (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Buller, 2010; Dewey, 1997).

Anderman and Leake (2005) adapted the SDT theory and designed an ABC model of student motivation. They maintain there are three key components to motivation (the ABC's): autonomy (the student has some measure of personal control over his or her education), belonging (the student experiences a social connection to the instructor, classmates, and the school environment), and competence (attributions and self-efficacy). Anderman & Leake (2005) emphasized that research should not address student needs as though they are separate, disparate conditions, but instead provide results that synthesize the data to form applicable solutions. They presented compelling arguments for increasing students' autonomy in the learning process, and the importance of improving teacher-student relationships, which fosters belonging.

Feeling connected also raises a student's perception of academic control (Cross, 1981; Creasey, Jarvis, & Gadke, 2009; Perry, 2003; Skinner, 1984; Vella, 2002; Wlodkowski, 1993). According to Perry (2003), "High academic control fosters a mastery orientation to achievement-striving in students, while low academic control contributes to a helplessness orientation" (Perry, 2003, p. 325). However, Rovai (2003) states, "There is no simple formula that ensures student persistence" (p. 12). He recommends institutions utilize as many internal and external components as possible prior to and after admission to improve student retention (Rovai, 2003).

What about the students who do not complete their course of study? Lovitts and Nelson (2000) report that,

> Most faculty assume that the best students finish their degrees and the less talented and qualified depart. Those who leave are often called "dropouts" to emphasize both volition and inevitability; the term suggests the problem is with the student, not with the program. (p. 3)

Yet their research among graduate students concluded that those who left the program often had higher grade point averages than those who completed the program. They concluded that, "it is a lack of integration into the departmental community that contributes most heavily to the departure of graduate students" (p. 3).

A qualitative research project conducted by Assiter and Gibbs (2007) noted that despite the information from institutions regarding student withdrawal from a course (which usually cite only one reason) most students have more than one reason for withdrawing. In addition, their explanations varied depending on the audience requesting the information (Assiter and Gibbs, 2007).

> One way of looking at attrition . . . is to suppose that it is multi causal. Students tend to give one reason when asked . . . but actually it often involves several

> interlocking issues – finance, friends, homesickness, study problems, illness, etc. and perhaps most importantly of all, a fear of failure. (p. 89)

What motivates adults to pursue education, and how many motivating factors need to be present for them to persevere in their individual goals? Research demonstrates that "almost every learner has more than one reason for engaging in learning" (Cross, 1981, p. 83). This study attempted to search out answers to these questions by asking rural students about their experiences as distance learners, what motivated them to embark on their degree program, and what kept them persevering with their studies.

Researcher's Interest in the Study

My fifteen years of experience working with CCHE, initially as the student services coordinator in which I worked one-to-one with distance learning students, and for the past twelve years as executive director, provided me with the opportunity to step back and observe the CCHE program at a distance and see the regional and national impact of the CCHE organization. These years of experience provided valuable insight into a unique community of learners. As Creswell (2007) points out, it is important to have prolonged experience working with people "solvent" to your student (p. 207).

My anthropology background helped me maintain an observer's perspective to reduce researcher reflexivity in the study and helped me remain open to what the participants revealed about the culture of non-traditional distance learning students.

Definitions of the Terminology

Adult student: Age 24 or older (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Rovai, 2003).

Distance learning: Coursework delivered to the student with little to no time spent on campus. Distance learning includes correspondence courses, Interactive Television (ITV), online courses, and online visual components such as Skype, Wimba, ViVu, or

other similar technology that achieves real-time video and audio communication. Distance learning courses incorporating some form of technology generally follow the campus calendar for start and finish dates. Correspondence courses can be completed within a semester if the instructor accepts assignments via e-mail, however most correspondence courses take an average of six months to complete, and generally must be completed within one year.

Hybrid learning: A combination of two or more distance learning delivery modes that may or may not include an on-campus component. Hybrid learning follows the campus calendar for start and finish dates.

Mentoring/coaching: For the purpose of this research, mentoring refers to when a student or group of students receives guidance from an expert in the field of study. That individual may be a current instructor, former instructor, current professional, or retired professional.

Non-traditional student: An off-campus student, generally an adult with family commitments, employed part-time or full-time, and enrolled in a degree program part-time or full-time. Non-traditional students may take some or all classes on campus if living within driving distance, but will also take some or all coursework using distance learning technology.

Node: Coding term from QSR International's NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software. In this study it refers to factors impacting rural distance learners.

Retention/completion rate: Sometimes used to refer to individual course completion. For the purpose of this research, retention rate refers to certificate or degree completion.

Video enhanced courses: Online courses using computer-based visual components such as Skype or ViVu to provide students with a real-time visual learning environment with the instructor and fellow classmates.

Acronyms

Attributional Retraining (AR): Competence can be improved through "attributional retraining" (AR), which involves helping students consider new options, study skills, positive thinking, and other such "attributes" that increase student performance (Hall, et al., 2007).

Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction (ARCS): A seven-step motivation model for instructors developed in 1987 by Keller to improve retention rates (Keller, 1999).

Autonomy, Belonging, and Competence (ABC): A motivation model designed by Anderman and Leake (2005); premised and adapted on Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory.

Cook County Higher Education (CCHE): A non-profit distance learning resource center located in Northeast Minnesota; also referred to as Higher Ed by the rural distance learners participating in this study.

Composite Persistence Model (CPM): Attributed to Rovai (2003), the Composite Persistence Model combines Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model to identify internal persistence factors within an institution's control (such as social integration and learning styles) and external factors persistence factors (such as student health and finances).

Face-to-face (f2f): Face-to-face learning environment, generally referring to traditional setting where all students are in one classroom.

Interactive Television (ITV): Real-time distance learning utilizing voice and video. Each location needs to have ITV equipment, which includes a television (specially formatted to cope with ITV technology), a camera, and audio microphones.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT): The importance of belonging, of being connected and engaged, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Organization of the Study

Chapter I introduced the study project and context of the problem. Chapter II identifies the methods and procedures utilized for this grounded theory research project. Chapter III uses a narrative format to present distance learning from the rural student's perspective. Chapter IV presents a comprehensive analysis of the grounded theory data by merging the focus group discussion and individual interview data to present a summary of the data with respect to the literature. Chapter V presents a summary, assertions, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER II

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Methods and Procedures Overview

This study utilized qualitative research techniques. Qualitative research is the means of gaining deeper understanding of a situation, issue, or problem (Poggenpoel, 2005). Creswell defines qualitative research as a broad inquiry that provides an opportunity to hear the participant's perspective, which the researcher can use to identify common themes (Creswell, 2008). Qualitative research provides a researcher with an opportunity to hear the participant's voice, and is ideal for researching specific population groups (Kuper, Martimianakis, McNaughton, Albert, & Hodges, 2010).

I chose a grounded theory approach because the process "*generates* a theory when existing theories do not address your problem or the participants you plan to study" (Creswell, 2008, p. 432). Creswell (2008) observes that a good research design is when there are "models available, but they were developed and tested on samples and populations other than those of interest to the qualitative researcher" (p. 660). Although there is a rich resource of motivation research conducted in reference to on-campus students, less research has been conducted in reference to off-campus students, and those research projects are quantitative and do not compare to the community of off-campus learners at CCHE's distance learning resource center.

Colleges and universities rely almost entirely on quantitative data obtained from course evaluations to make policy decisions regarding student satisfaction, retention

rates, and instructor effectiveness (Kelly, Ponton, & Rovai, 2007). Quantitative research, while creating measurable results, omits students' perceptions and the rich detail that can help us understand the underlying reasons for student motivation. "Technical evaluation reports are rarely sufficient to meet the needs of, or communicate well with, the variety of stakeholding audiences" (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 551). In addition, past research has frequently regarded adult, non-traditional students as not-for credit students (Kasworm, 2008; Kortesoja, 2009; Ng, 2008). There is little qualitative research surrounding distance learning populations, and those few research articles address specific learner populations, such as students with learning disabilities (Hinchcliffe & Gavin, 2009; Zambo, 2004). This study covered a broad range in age, study emphasis, and degree sought.

Design of the Study

This grounded theory method research project explored rural students' perceptions of what motivates them to persist in distance learning programs. "Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 2). This study explored the following research questions:

1. What motivates rural distance learning students to persist?
2. What support resources do rural distance learning students need to complete their course of study?

Results from this study could be used to implement distance learning support services in other rural communities, disseminate the information to other institutions in the hopes of increasing retention rates across the nation, and foster continued success for

CCHE students. My rationale was premised on the assumption that providing support resources contributes to higher retention rates.

Participant Selection

Six currently enrolled students were invited to participate in a focus group to provide comparative analysis with the students who had completed or withdrawn. As Palomba and Banta (1999) point out, "Focus groups provide an excellent opportunity to listen to the voices of students, explore issues in depth, and obtain insights that might not occur without the discussion they provide" (p.197). The participants were selected based on the criterion that they were currently enrolled in a degree program while living and working in Cook County. Focus group participants were selected from a variety of disciplines (liberal arts, sciences, human services, business, and health care) to provide comparative analysis over a wide range of conditions and course rigor.

In addition to the focus group, individual interviews were conducted with seven participants. Six of the participants were selected based on the criterion that they had completed a degree program through CCHE while living and working in Cook County, and one of the participants was selected based on the criterion that the student had withdrawn from his program of study and did not complete the course of study while living and working in Cook County. As with the focus group, interview participants were selected from a variety of disciplines (education, human services, and health care fields) to provide comparative analysis over a wide range of conditions and course rigor.

The participant numbers were representative of CCHE's student degree and certificate enrollee population which includes adult learners with little or no college experience, displaced workers seeking new job skills for employment, and professionals

seeking additional training in the workplace for job advancement. CCHE's annual degree program enrollment ranges from 50 to 110 students annually. The enrollment number varies depending on the degree or certificate programs CCHE is able to locally provide. For instance, in 2009 four students formed a cohort of registered nurse enrollees and completed their course of studies in 2010, and in 2011 twelve students formed a cohort of licensed practical nurse enrollees, and they are scheduled to complete their course of studies in 2012.

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted because researchers agree that the open format of in-depth interviews provide an opportunity to gain deeper understanding of underlying issues (Agee, 2009, DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Patton, 1997). Further, Creswell (2008) claims that "one-on-one interviews are useful for asking sensitive questions and enabling interviewees to ask questions or provide comments that go beyond initial questions" (p. 396). This study provided an opportunity to obtain thick responses from students and identify specific theories to explain CCHE's success rate.

Protecting Anonymity

All participants had the option of withdrawing from the project at any time. To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants, pseudonyms were utilized to identify interview and focus group individuals in the transcripts and reports. It should be noted that student age was described as a range, and specific fields of study were also generalized to further protect the participants. Cook County is a small community, and if specific degrees and student age were mentioned, it could be possible to deduct a participant's identity. Recorded interview tapes were labeled by numbers

corresponding to the respondent. Informed consent documents, interview tapes, and transcripts were kept in a secure location at the researcher's home. Informed consent documents were kept separately from interview tapes and transcripts. As recommended by Willis (2007), I used an open approach and was honest with my participants about the purpose and goals of the study.

Site

The focus group and individual interviews took place at CCHE; the focus group in a classroom, and the individual interviews in a small study room. The CCHE location was selected because it was a familiar, comfortable, and safe location for the participants, convenient for the students, and was free from outside distraction.

Guiding Focus Group and Interview Questions

Charmaz (2010) recommends that interview questions should be "sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences and narrow enough to elicit and elaborate the participant's specific experience" (p. 29). The focus group and individual interview participants were asked the same basic questions to help assure comparison of responses between the two populations of learners, although there were slight differences in the questions. The focus group participant questions were in present tense because they were currently enrolled students, and the individually interviewed participant questions were in the past tense since they had already completed or withdrawn from their course of study (see Appendix).

Data Collection

This study explored causal conditions to identify a central phenomenon using open, axial, and selective coding to build a picture of the "evolving theory" (Creswell,

2007, p. 239). The data collection methods were an in-depth semi-structured focus group and individual interviews. The semi-structured approach is important. As Patton (1997) observes, "I prefer to have soft or rough measures of important goals rather than highly precise, quantitative measures of goals that no much cares about" (p. 161). The focus group and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A journal was also kept throughout the research project for memos and observations.

The focus group was conducted first to gain group understanding and dialogue regarding the non-traditional student experience in the distance learning environment. The focus group participants and individual interviewees were asked to narrate their experiences in the distance learning environment. Demographic information was gathered to link with the qualitative results to explore differences.

The focus group and individual interviews were conducted after receiving Institutional Review Board approval from the University of North Dakota and informed consent from the subjects. Written informed consent was received from the participants after fully explaining the purpose of the study, benefits and risks of participating in the study, confidentiality intent and procedure, anticipated participant time commitment, and notification that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time.

Data Analysis

Throughout the course of the research I followed recommended data analysis procedures and carefully tracked and analyzed systematically collected data using QSR International's NVivo 9 qualitative research software as a data management and analysis tool. I kept a journal for personal reflections throughout the duration of the research project, and carefully documented my research process and data analyses. As Creswell

(2007) points out, it is important to document your chain of reason so others can "judge the trustworthiness of the meanings" (p. 206). I shared my preliminary analyses with participants to check for accuracy and look for omissions, and after drawing conclusions, sought "verification from the participants" (Willis, 2007, p. 208). I also enrolled the assistance of an individual with extensive audit experience and not connected to the study to examine my documentation methods.

I maintained reliability by making sure that my research process was "consistent, reasonably stable over time and across researchers and methods" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 278). Conclusions were weighted by comparing results with motivation research theory. As Miles and Huberman (1994) state, "if data on which a conclusion is based are known to be stronger, more valid than the average, then the conclusion is strengthened" (pp. 267-268). Creswell (2007) claims that for substantive validation to happen, it is important to be clear about "one's own understandings of the topic, understandings derived from other sources, and the documentation of the written study" (p. 206).

The participants ranged in age from 31 to 60, and were representative of CCHE's rural distance learners, supporting literature identifying a growing trend of non-traditional adult students (Instructional Technology Council, 2010). Data analysis was conducted on the verbatim transcripts of each interview participant and from the focus group sessions. The data analysis was conducted using recommended grounded theory constant comparative methods which included reviewing the transcripts, assigning codes to the text, grouping the codes, creating themes, and identifying relationships and patterns (Charmaz, 2010; Creswell, 2008; Patton, 1997; Saldana, 2009).

Procedures for Ensuring Validity

Validity is dependent on the researcher's rigor, skills, and competence (Patton, 1997). Rigor and integrity are imperative to assure validity in research (Patton, 2001). According to program evaluation standards, standards of analysis are the same for qualitative and quantitative research (Patton, 1997). The 1994 Joint Committee decision states, "Information in an evaluation should be appropriately and systematically analyzed so that evaluation questions are effectively answered" (Joint Committee, 1994, as cited in Patton, 1997, p. 277). Throughout the course of this study the data analysis process and study results were reviewed by my doctoral committee and an individual not connected with the study.

Summary

Throughout this research project I systematically applied constant comparative data analysis to the data to assure consistency and to increase the potential of replicating the results in another rural community.

CHAPTER III

DISTANCE LEARNING FROM A RURAL STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore rural students' perceptions of what motivates them to persist in distance learning programs. Specifically, this grounded theory research study sought to explore what motivates rural distance learning students to persist, and to identify support resources rural distance learning students need to reach their goals.

In this chapter I used narratives to describe the six individuals who participated in the focus group session and the seven individuals who participated in the individual interviews, which formed the basis of the grounded theory results that emerged from the data. This chapter introduces and describes the participants in this study in two separate sections. First, the six students participating in the focus group are introduced and described, followed by narrative portions. Second, the seven individually interviewed students in the study are presented and described as a group followed by individual narrative portions. Motivation theories and other research findings are interspersed within the narrative.

Description of Focus Group Students

The focus group consisted of six students currently enrolled in a degree program, and the degree emphasis areas included liberal arts, sciences, human services, business,

and health care fields. To protect their anonymity I referred to them as Ashton, Avery, Bailey, Kendall, Madison, and Piper.

Demographic Information

There were five women and one man in the focus group, with an age span of 31 to 51 years of age. Their degree of study was a career change for three of the students. One of the students was unemployed, two were working part-time, and two were working full-time. One of the students had no prior college learning, four had some college experience, and one student already had a degree. One of the students had taken locally offered (in Cook County) face-to-face classes as part of their degree program; the other five were completing their coursework entirely at a distance.

The Focus Group

The focus group spent a large portion of their time discussing the many challenges presented by distance learning. They expressed that they often felt overwhelmed by the online course web sites, stating that it was difficult to navigate, and blamed their age and lack of familiarity with using computers. Several of the students pointed out that today's youth grew up using computers, and mentioned that their children would often help them find what they had been searching for on the course site. Avery spoke of technology as a barrier, partly because of her age and not feeling comfortable with learning how to use Skype and other applications, but also because of the distortions it brought to her learning experience, such as the inability to get together spontaneously with other students to talk about assignments or just visit.

Researchers have acknowledged that the distance learning environment presents new challenges for social interaction, and instructors must take an active role to increase

social presence in the online learning environment "as social context cues are fewer, social presence is lower, and as social presence goes down so does sense of community" (Rovai, 2002, p. 8). "Promoting a strong sense of community" helps students (p. 12). It reduces isolation, and promotes perseverance.

As a further challenge, Avery had just completed a course in which the instructor had expressed her irritation that Avery was in the class via ITV when all the other students were on-campus. Lee and Busch (2005) claim that many instructors do not like to teach via distance learning "because they believe it differs significantly from face-to-face instruction in ways that are important to effective instruction" (p. 110). One of the course requirements was for Avery to give a group presentation. She stated,

> The teacher kind of wanted me to fail because I was on ITV, so when it came time for me to lead the group [presentation], I would rather be on the TV screen, up in front of the class, rather than in the class with these people, who I don't even really know because I don't see their gestures, and their facial expressions, and can hardly hear what they are saying half the time because the speaking isn't very good from their end because of the microphone setup they have. I had to prove I could do a good job in that class, which I ended up doing.

Avery's observations not only revealed her challenges using the technology, but also demonstrated that a real-time classroom situation using ITV did not eliminate feelings of isolation and separation. Madison felt this most acutely because most of her coursework was being offered via correspondence. Without an instructor immediately available, even email communication had not been sufficient for her needs, especially with mathematics courses. She stated,

> You're doing everything through email, so it's not like you have somebody right there that can show you how to work this problem. Like for this math class I'm taking right now, it's so hard to even type [the problem] on the computer when you have negative powers and all of these symbols. It's been frustrating.

Research on student achievement in the distance learning environment revealed that isolation and self-doubts were the most debilitating to student motivation, and that this is countered when students feel connected to the college and college community (Keller, 1999; Rovai, 2003). Madison, however, did not have much of a bond with the school. As she pointed out, it was as though the instructors said, *"here's your stuff, do the work, and that's it – you're on your own."* As De Gagne and Walters (2009) assert, "the identification of a social presence concept implies that online teachers must be *visible* so that students are able to 'see' and 'hear' their instructors" (p. 586). This is particularly difficult to achieve with a correspondence course. Yet online courses do not necessarily eliminate the isolation, or create a sense of community. Ashton observed,

> It wasn't until my fourth semester that I finally met one of my instructors . . . I got to go to the campus and give a speech and meet the teacher and it was an incredible experience to realize all this time I have actually been a part of a group of people, and [before] I had had no sense of that at all.

Not all of the students felt isolated. Kendall described having a strong connection with her online classmates. She commented:

> This was my first semester, and I did feel connected to my class. She [the instructor] would give us a question, and we'd all have to answer . . . and we had to do that back and forth. And so I did get to feel I kind of got to know some people. I felt connected.

Bailey concurred, and added that her online instructors were flexible and accommodating. She observed,

> You could tell they [the school] spent a lot of time designing the distance education program. My courses were set up very nicely so I could access everything I needed to when I needed it. But I didn't have to do a lot of classroom interaction. And I only had a couple of conference calls. For me it [the online format] was an asset.

Kendall and Bailey's experiences, so opposite of Avery's, illustrate Lee and Busch's (2005) research outlining the value of instructors who embrace distance learning technology and are well-trained in effectively using distance learning course delivery. Other researchers concur, claiming that to build trust and a strong sense of community for the learner it is necessary to foster student to student interactions and student to instructor interactions (De Gagne & Walters, 2009; Lesniak & Hodes, 2000; Rovai, 2003).

Some of the colleges had learning platforms that were easier to navigate, and many of the students had to take courses from more than one school in order to fulfill the prerequisites required for their program of study. Although many colleges were part of the same system, such as Minnesota State College and University (MnSCU), there were enough variations – even if it was the same distance learning platform – that the students experienced uncertainty and confusion. Ashton stated that he could easily find his email from one school, but not from the new one he was attending. As an additional challenge, few of the students had a strong Internet access, and most of the students did their coursework and testing at the CCHE campus.

While technology was most often cited as a challenge, technology was also regarded as a versatile tool and study aid. For instance, Ashton used a Mac system which had a speech mode that he used for his lecture notes. He said,

> I select the text and go "speech, speak now," and it reads it to me and I just follow along. It keeps me thinking. Those are real, practical things that I do because otherwise, I'm thinking about something completely different while I'm looking at the words.

There was a general query about the speech program from the rest of the students, who were very impressed with the concept. Ashton went on to say:

> The other thing I do, I read my chapter out loud into my phone as a voice memo, and I play it to myself on my iPod when I am going to sleep. I can make copies of it for my lab partner, so they can just listen to the chapter. And I get it doubly – speaking, reading, and hearing it.

Visual stimulation was very important for many of the students. Avery became quite animated while describing her digital photography course. Avery shared that,

> One class that I really felt connected in was digital photography. We took pictures and download them on the site, and the teacher compiled them. It's all the students, and you can see what they take pictures of and what they like and don't like. And then you had to critique their photos based on whether it is line or color, or whatever. So yeah, you got to know somebody by what kind of pictures they took. It was really fun.

The group discussed how helpful it would be if each class had the option of posting photos of all the online students in their course.

All of the students mentioned using a variety of study aids to avoid getting distracted. As Madison pointed out, *"It's hard to stay motivated. I mean, I can think of every excuse in the world not to work on my school work!"* Their observations are in keeping with Pratt (2011), who adjures students to be on the watch for distracters.

Bailey commented that her schedule was very intense for two month periods, which helped her move quickly through her program. She also commented on how much she valued the practical, pertinent applications of her coursework to her employment. Bailey's comments illustrate claims that pertinence and application are critical to adult learners (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Buller, 2010; Huba & Freed, 2000; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Wlodkowski, 1993).

Avery's motivation was geared toward getting through her degree program so she could begin working in her field of choice. The other students echoed this desire. Their comments aligned with A. Rogers' (2002) premise that occupation is one of the driving

forces for adults to pursue higher education. Similarly, all of the students expressed more altruistic values, such as making a difference in the community, and modeling good study habits for their children. Levy's (2006) research indicates that value is an important measure of a learner's perceived satisfaction, and can serve as an indicator for learners' perceived learning.

Kendall stated that although she had a fairly decent job with benefits, she wanted more. She had been passed up for a job promotion, and this experience prompted her to further her career. She stated,

> I just want to feel better about myself, that I actually did it. And you know for my kids, too! I don't want them looking at me and saying, "Well, you didn't go to college, and look, you still got a pretty good job." I want them to do better than I did.

All of the students stated that they would not have been able to pursue their degree if CCHE had not made the opportunity available. Ashton elaborated on this topic and stated,

> If we were in an urban area, we might take Higher Ed [CCHE] a little bit for granted, but when we're going into post-secondary education here [in Cook County] we really have to go out of our way – it doesn't just fall into our lap. It's not convenient, and I think because of that, we're more committed to it in a way. I know for me – I quit my job to do this, and took student loans. Failure is not an option for me. It just isn't. We take it a lot more seriously because it doesn't come easy for us.

The students appeared to know their strengths and weaknesses, although they were surprised to discover that they were mentally and emotionally stronger, more skilled, and more capable than they had expected. Some of their fears came from past experiences that had shaped their life – until now. Ashton shared his personal fears surrounding education:

> One thing that really, really frightened me was math. When I was in second grade, my second grade teacher told my mother at a parent teacher conference that, "I don't believe Ashton has the ability to learn." And I grew up with that belief, and I accepted that and I believed that. [As a result] I was never a particularly dedicated student until I got into high school, and then things started making sense for me, but I often floundered.

Ashton's story was echoed by Piper, Kendall, and Bailey, and correlates with Csikszentmihalyi's (2008) premise that unpleasant memories prompt many individuals to "give up on learning" (p. 141). Ashton stated that when he was in high school he did not take chemistry or geometry, and did not pass high school Algebra. For college entrance however, he was dismayed to discover he would need to take a math assessment test. He shared,

> When Kirstin [CCHE staff] told me I had to take a math test I thought, well, I'll just quit now, without even trying – and I aced my aptitude test! Jean Marie [CCHE staff] lent me a book, All the Math You'll Ever Need, and it was true, and so I got an A in my math course this semester. So that was overcoming something HUGE that had to do with the way I view myself. The last couple of years going back to school have been revolutionary for me.

The focus group students' subsequent relief and empowerment at having positive, reinforcing learning experiences as a result of their current efforts demonstrated the theory that positive feedback fosters student success. As Vella (2002) states, "Immediate success encourages the learners to begin to believe they can learn" (p. 236).

Several students mentioned concerns about how long it had been since being in school, and that their age might be a learning barrier. One student felt younger being back in school, and liked being able to use a student ID as a bus pass when in a city, to get a discount at gas stations, and even when shopping. This brought up the question of how to obtain a student ID. This individual had gone to the campus to get the ID, but it

became apparent that distance students, unless they went to the campus, were not offered the option of a student ID – or if they were, they were unaware of the option. It was obvious that all of the distance students would like to have a college ID to feel more connected to the campus.

Overall, the students felt that distance learning was a challenge. Ashton stated, *"For much of the program, almost every day, I considered dropping out. I thought, 'I can't do this. I can't . . . its just too difficult, too much work.'"* He discovered, however, that he could. Ashton's summary was representative of how the focus group students regarded their educational experiences.

> My first course was a psychology course and I ended up having the highest score in the class. I discovered I can do this. And it really showed me that this is what I want to do. School has already changed my life. I want to say that yeah, I am working toward my degree and certification, but in a way, school has been a reward in itself regarding my self-esteem, the whole way that I think of myself. I think I'm a smart person now, which I don't think I would have said when I started this journey. There are so many people out there that want to help you if you just ask.

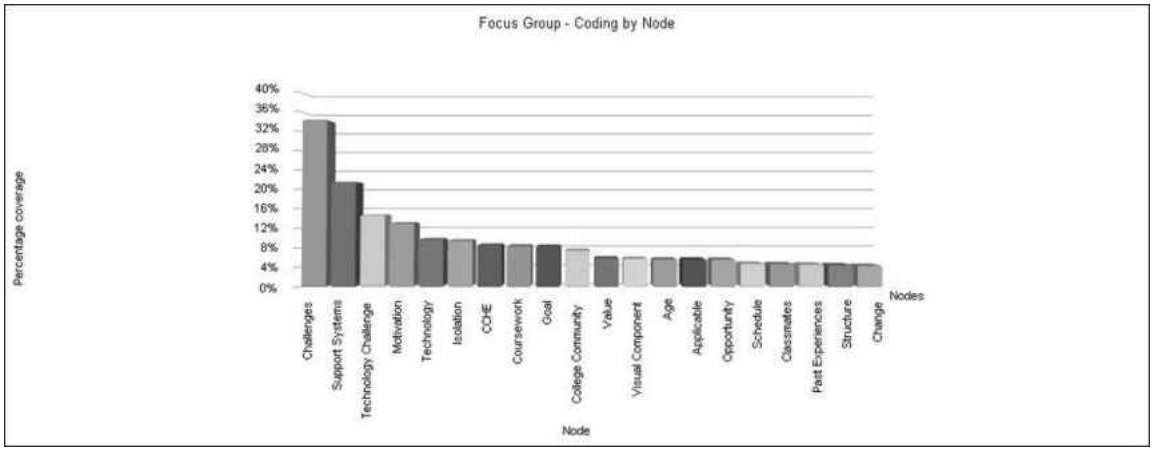


Figure 1: Focus Group Code Designations by Percentage of Discussion

Brief Summary of the Focus Group

Themes began to emerge immediately and served as a basis for comparison with the subsequent individual interviews. The most critical factors were challenges: 34% of the one hour focus group session centered on challenges in general, followed by support systems at 21%. Two other issues discussed most often were technology challenges (a subgroup of challenges) which comprised 15% of the discussion, and motivation factors at 13% (see Figure 1). Chapter IV will address the findings in more detail.

Description of Individual Interview Students

The individually interviewed students consisted of seven students who had completed their degree program, and one student who had withdrawn from his program of study. The degree emphasis areas included education, human services, and health care fields. To protect their anonymity, I referred to them as Carson, Emerson, Marley, Reese, Riley, Sophia, and Logan, who is the student who withdrew.

Demographic Information

There were four women and three men who were individually interviewed, with an age span of 37 to 60 years of age. Their degree of study was a career change for all of the students. Two of the students were unemployed throughout their degree program, two worked part-time, and three worked full-time. All of the students had prior college learning, and of those seven, five held degrees prior to enrolling in their distance degree program. Only one of the students had locally offered (Cook County) face-to-face classes as part of the degree program, four of the students had some on-campus components to their courses (hybrid), and the other two completed their coursework entirely at a distance.

Carson

Carson's biggest challenge for going back to college was committing full attention to education while also balancing financial and family commitments. He regarded his spouse as his primary support and the most critical factor in his success, especially in reference to the financial commitment. He devoted his full attention to studies and was not employed at all for the duration of his degree.

> Luckily my wife makes a pretty good wage, and we didn't spend a lot of extra money. Without my spouse's support, and the support of friends, family, and Higher Ed [CCHE], I would never have done it. That support made a really *big* difference. I thought, "Man, this isn't going to work, its going to take too long, it's too expensive, we can't afford it, and I don't know if I will get a job when I am done." When I got discouraged their support kept me going and I am glad I did continue because it is working out.

Carson disliked that the program was at a distance, but this was the only way for him to earn a degree in his field of interest, and he did not consider other degrees or career choices.

> I was really interested in this subject, as a career, and because it is a subject I feel strongly about and know a lot about. And the program was available. I really think that on-campus is better, for reasons I am not really sure of. At the same time, I would not have been able to do my degree program if it hadn't been offered via distance. I just plain wouldn't have done it.

His degree program was approximately 95% distance learning and 5% on the campus. To his surprise, he made strong connections with his instructors and fellow students, and experienced rapport in their interactions. Carson states, *"I really felt I got to know them and become friends. I am really going to miss some of them when I move on."* Like several of the students in the focus group, Carson experienced the value of

social presence that researchers claim is necessary for building community among distance learners (De Gagne & Walters, 2009; Lesniak & Hodes, 2000; Rovai, 2003). When asked if he would have built the same rapport if he had not had the face-to-face classes, Carson stated, *"Yes, I think so. Maybe not to the same degree, but we are still friends through the connections we made. That surprised me."*

Carson did not have a laptop or home computer and did almost all of his coursework at the CCHE campus. He experienced some problems with the technology, particularly elements that required video components delivered via computer. He stated, *"Technology can be a challenge . . . it's nobody's fault, it's just the technology."* Disruption occurred as much as 20% of the time with the video-based courses offered using ViVu, sometimes not working at all. In addition, there was a voice delay of three to five seconds making participation in class discussions awkward and frustrating. In contrast, video-based courses delivered via Interactive Television (ITV) worked very well. Carson expressed the wish for better distance learning software.

> I didn't ask a lot of questions [out loud] because for me it felt a little awkward, because by the time you asked your question she [the instructor] had already moved on to something else in class. There was a three to five second delay with my voice getting to the class so I felt a bit awkward with that. So sometimes I would just send her an email and she would respond very quickly.

Although Carson felt a strong bond with his instructors and classmates, and regarded them as a key support network, he did not feel a strong connection to the college. He felt connected to CCHE, however, and stated, *"It feels like a campus."* Carson's response emphasizes what Ryan and Deci (2000) refer to as self-determination theory, or the importance of belonging.

Because of past college experience, Carson felt confident in his study skills and felt prepared for the academic challenges of his coursework. Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, and Elliot (2002) avow that "ability and prior performance have independent, positive effects on academic performance" (p. 570). Researchers concur that having strong academic skills prior to enrollment has shown to be a strong predictor for college retention (Rovai, 2003; Tsui, 2007). Furthermore, Harackiewicz et al. (2002) suggest that "interest and performance may both be important in influencing long-term academic choices" (p. 572). Carson demonstrated this as he is also looking to the future and considering acquiring additional licensure that will increase his job options. He concluded, "*I feel I have hope for the future of being employed in a stimulating field."*

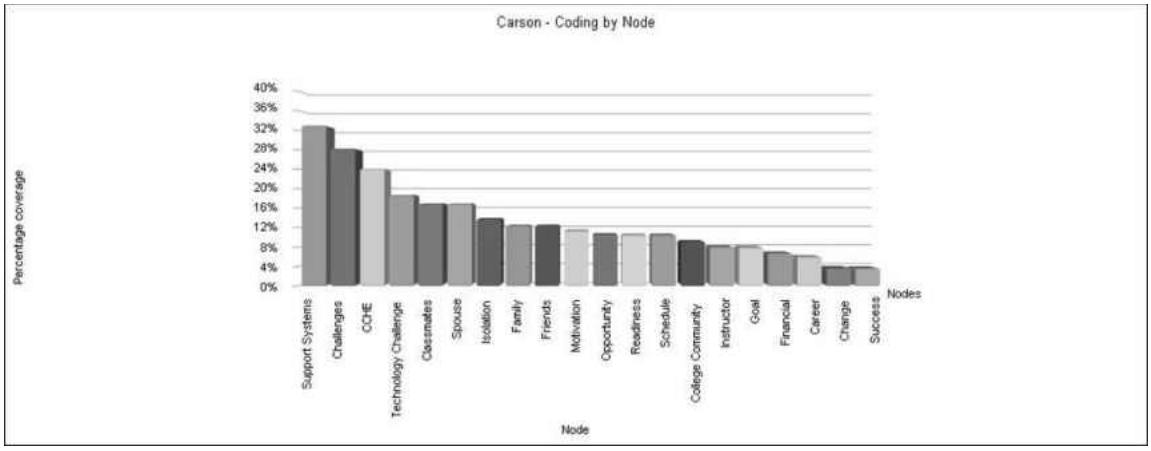


Figure 2: Carson Code Designations by Percentage of Discussion

Brief Summary of Carson

Challenges and support systems played a primary part in Carson's education, but the priorities were opposite that of the focus group. The most critical factor for Carson was his support systems which comprised 33% of the interview, followed by challenges at 28%. It is interesting that these two almost balance each other. CCHE (one of the support system subgroups) played an important role at 24%, and that was balanced by

technology challenges at 18% (see Figure 2). Chapter IV will address the findings in more detail.

Emerson

Emerson enrolled in her degree program because of the local opportunity to earn a degree that would provide employment in a health care field. Although she already had a degree, the opportunity awakened a long-time desire to work in the health care field. She would not have pursued the career, however, if CCHE had not brought the program to the community. Emerson stated, "*I think the fact that Higher Ed [CCHE] was here to be the go-between for the distance student and the college is the only reason it was possible."* After completing a two-year degree she went on to a four-year completion program that was entirely online.

Because of her science and education background she was not worried about her academic skills. Like Carson, Emerson was prepared for her academic agenda. She expressed her love of learning, and her appreciation of the school format with clear expectations and goals. As she observed, "*I like the accomplishment – that it is measureable. That fits my personality."* There were some challenges, however. She confessed,

> It was hard not to be excellent right away at clinicals. Just terrible. There were people who had more experience than me, and they walked in with pertinent skills. I listen well, and like to educate others, but clinical skills were horribly hard and I had to learn it all. That was my challenge. It is very difficult to be new learner and accept yourself as a new learner and accept yourself until you learn.

Emerson had strong family support, especially from her husband. She was unemployed throughout the duration of her degree program, and as she put it, her husband *"really picked up the slack. He took care of things while I studied, and made*

sure I had everything I needed." She also felt supported by her fellow classmates, and enjoyed the reciprocity of that relationship. Emerson recognized her learning needs and did not participate in study group sessions because that did not fit her learning style. At the same time, she was willing to work with another student to learn the material, and enjoyed the relationship bond that formed in the process. Emerson said,

> From my totally online program I have a dear friend whom I have never met. We send Christmas cards, and write – and we got through statistics together. We keep saying we are going to meet at the campus someday.

Emerson enjoyed learning about the community when she had to go on campus, and felt welcomed there by the administration, instructors, and students, but she did not feel a particular bond with the two year college or the four year college. *I wasn't looking for that at this stage in my life. I don't feel like an alumnus of something. No, I don't feel some great connection, and I don't need it.* Her biggest hardship regarding the campus visits was the financial burden, since the short visits required seeking hotel accommodations. Coupled with student loans, this made the program more expensive, but as she pointed out, she could not have earned the degree any other way.

Emerson placed a high value on the locally offered classes, stating that their instructor stood out. She described him as key to their success and stated, *"We couldn't have done it without Mark [local instructor], here, and not just that, but we couldn't have done it without Mark. He stands out. He was crucial."* She also had positive comments about one of the professors at the college, describing her as very professional and holding them to high standards, but at the same time being warm, listening to their needs, and collaborative. The only instructor she did not care for had what Emerson referred to as a threatening method for motivating students. Emerson stated, *"I am ready to work a little*

bit more collaboratively. And to be trusted that I was actually going to be able to reach the goals, without being threatened." As De Gagne and Walters (2009) observe, "collaborative learning processes . . . allow students to achieve deeper levels of knowledge generation" (p. 584). Emerson's complaint also ties directly to intrinsic reward research. Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) concluded that adult learners are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, and that extrinsic rewards (which Emerson interpreted as threats) reduce motivation.

According to Emerson all of the instructors were supportive and quick to respond to questions via email. They were also open to phone calls for more immediate feedback and dialogue. "*The fact that they were open to phone calls, with someone you trust, that was crucial."* Trust is cited by researchers as an important component for building community among distance learners (Rogers, A., 2002; Vella, 2002).

Her four-year completion program also provided significant support. Emerson stated,

> They [the advisors] signed us up, which removes a barrier when you are sitting at home frustrated with a computer program. That really helps when you are in a program where you have to march through in order. When you are frustrated with the process, then you don't want to go, or you are late [with deadlines] – it eased the path.

Another support system was CCHE, which she used as a support resource for her first two years of coursework. Although Emerson had some online coursework, CCHE assisted by coordinating locally offered classes and collaborated with the college campus to arrange cohort sessions for college campus clinicals. Her comments in reference to CCHE:

> Life savers! We [the health care cohort] so leaned on you guys at first. We were pretty helpless and overwhelmed, and you guys were there! We got helped and the answers were found. Kirstin [CCHE] was good at that – friendly, resilient, and never crabby, and she always came through. We really needed the [CCHE] office for things like proctoring and signing up for classes; CCHE smoothed the way.

Emerson concluded by saying,

> Higher Ed is the perfect place to go to say, "How might I do this?" and puzzle out the choices. That's what this liaison position is about, because you guys are up on what is out there. I am up on what is good for me, and then it can be figured out.

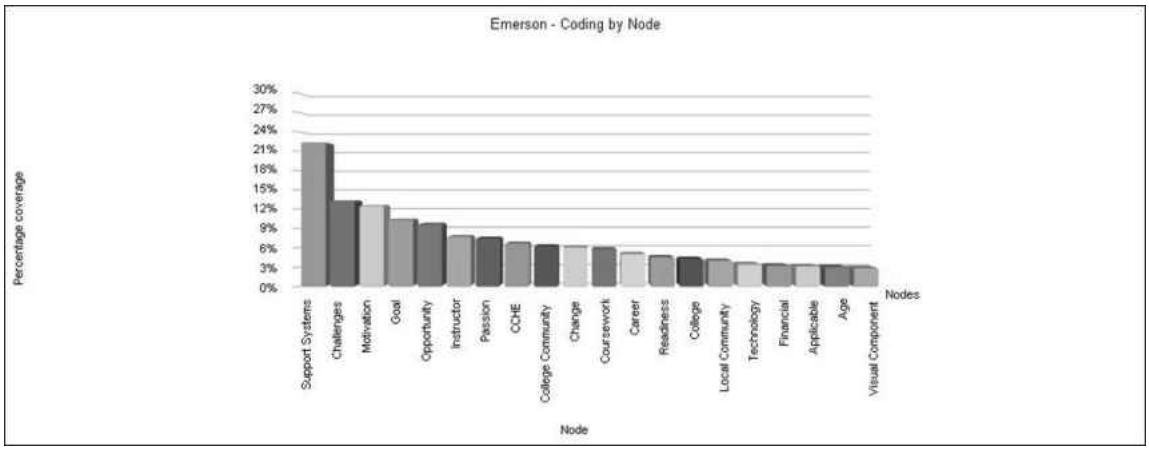


Figure 3: Emerson Code Designations by Percentage of Discussion

Brief Summary of Emerson

As with the focus group and Carson, challenges, support systems, and motivation played a primary part in Emerson's education, but again the priority was different than that of the focus group. The most critical factor for Emerson was her support systems at 22%, followed by challenges at 13%. Like the focus group, motivation (12%) was also an important factor for Emerson, followed equally by goals and opportunities, both 10% (see Figure 3). Chapter IV will address the findings in more detail.

Marley

Marley had been considering future options for some time. Her children were in school during the day, and although she had been doing volunteer work in her field of interest, she wanted something richer and more challenging.

> I had not really thought about other options or plans for our family until the kids were in school full time. We always expected that I would get some kind of job, but we hadn't made specific plans. But I would never have considered any other field to go back to school for other than [my field of interest]. I heard about this at just the right time.

At the same time, there were no guarantees of employment in her field of interest. Cook County is a small community, and personal interests and job openings do not always align. She knew her education would provide temporary work, which was attractive because of the flexibility, but full time employment with benefits was less certain. According to Harackiewicz et al. (2002), "individuals' characteristic motivational orientation can influence the goals a student adopts" (p. 573). Marley had a philosophical view of her future opportunities:

> I knew that when I got finished with the degree, there weren't any job openings unless someone retired, and there would be competition for those positions. So I knew it wasn't a given that I would get a job here. But I also looked at it as, well, maybe this would be an opportunity to move somewhere else with the family. The kids were young enough – not like trying to pull them out of high school – to move somewhere out in the country and experience something new.

Her biggest challenges were the enormous financial commitment, and making sure she had the support of her family. She knew that she would have to be intensely focused on her school work at times and realized that would impact her relationship with her husband and children. Her extended family became a strong support system throughout the duration of her degree program, especially with child care. But she regarded her husband as the most helpful.

> Without him taking some of my responsibilities, and encouraging me, it would have been difficult. Although sometimes he would say, "Why are you doing this again?" But at the same time, without him being behind me, it would have been really hard.

Marley expressed surprise to discover how much she loved her learning experience. She loved the new challenges, and was stimulated by the interactions she had with her fellow students. Although Marley's program was largely online, there were some short face-to-face sessions on the campus that provided Marley with the opportunity to meet her professors and get to know her classmates. She valued the exchange of ideas that happened in these sessions, and it gave her a feeling of connection to the college. Her experiences demonstrate the benefits of hybrid programs, and how they contribute to building social presence and community (De Gagne & Walters, 2009). Marley discovered that having met her professors and classmates, she could better interpret their online postings, and felt more connected with the learning community in her discussion postings. Marley liked the online discussion format because, as she observed, the online environment was an equalizer. Everyone had the opportunity to speak.

> The online discussions gave voice to those students who are not as outgoing in class discussions – either because they were not competing with the loud students, or just shy like me. Because of that, everybody said something. I felt like you got more viewpoints and heard everybody.

Some of her online classes did not have face-to-face sessions. She enjoyed those classes, but she commented that she would have liked to have met her strictly online classmates, especially since Marley regarded her classmates and instructors as part of her support network. Marley stated,

> I felt really supported by my classmates. You could easily contact them – either page through D2L or email them with questions or feedback. I never felt alone – I always felt I could contact – either my professor or a fellow student.

Most of her professors were quick to respond to questions, but others were less timely. Sometimes it could be as long as three weeks to get response to a homework assignment, and this made turning in the next assignment more difficult, especially if she was building on previously submitted work. "*And for other professors I would turn something in and by the end of the week I would have it back."* Marley valued the professors who were more involved in the class, participating in the discussions, and she felt they were listening. Marley's response corresponds to Shea, Li, and Pickett's (2006) research that actively involving distance learners in "joint, cooperative pursuit of educational goals" will increase a student's feeling of classroom community (p. 176). Marley also mentioned that she preferred working with the more organized instructors, and attributed that to her own preference for being organized, which Rovai (2003) claims is necessary for students to succeed in the online learning environment. However Marley's observations align with Lesniak and Hodes' (2000) assertion that online instructors need to be more organized than their traditional classroom counterparts because the online learning environment itself is very organized.

Technology provided some challenges throughout Marley's program. She had dialup access at her home, which is not sufficient for most online courses. Marley used the CCHE computer lab, and she spent large chunks of time at the CCHE campus, often late into the evening [CCHE provides a key to the facility for student use]. As a result, CCHE was a valuable support system throughout Marley's degree program. Technology also brought Marley new learning experiences.

> I thought I was pretty comfortable with computers when I started, but doing the distance learning – I feel way more comfortable now with computers, but throughout the process I have learned different applications that are only going to serve me better in the job force because of the distance learning program.

CCHE's support went beyond just her technological needs, however. Marley stated, "*I loved Higher Ed. I wouldn't have made it through without Higher Ed. I felt really supported. If I had questions, someone here would be able to help me out no matter what."*

When asked about how she stayed motivated, Marley's response was quick: *"That was never an issue. I am one of those people who once I start something, I finish it."* She qualified her response by stating that if she had disliked the distance learning environment or if her first semester had been a horrible experience, she would have withdrawn. As she pointed out,

> When you are going to school online you have to be motivated, so if you are not truly into it you are going to have a hard time staying on track and staying focused. I had already been to school so I knew what to expect work wise [academically] – that your professors aren't going to remind you about papers that are due. People who have never been to school before should start out slow to see if this format [online] will work. In my cohort we had some that couldn't stay focused or just decided that distance learning wasn't for them.

Although Marley had a degree, was familiar with academic challenges, and considered herself a very organized, structured person, her former degree emphasis had been in the sciences and she was nervous about her current writing skills. Although this concern about her skills was valid, Marley was also demonstrating what Kasworm (2008) points out – that non-tradition adult students "believe that they have a high probability of success and are committed to quality learning experiences and a collegiate credential" and will work hard to overcome shortcomings (p. 28).

> I had not written a paper in a really long time, and even with my [science-related] degree, we didn't really write papers back then [for that field]. Maybe they do now, but I didn't. I wrote some in freshman comp, but little else. So for me that was it – the first class had three papers to write, which was super stressful to me. My husband would say, "Just sit down and type!" because he is really good at writing papers. As my three years went by it got easier – it is not super easy yet, but I can do it and it is not as stressful.

Marley's summary of her educational experience:

> I feel that this has opened me up [to new opportunities]. By becoming involved in this program in the online learning, this has opened up a new life for me. Partly because I am working full time, but mentally I was a bit stagnant before. Even if I don't get a job at the end of this year of working I feel the door has been opened up to all sorts of possibilities. I feel like I am able to handle more, able to do more, and am more confident in my self. I can do this, with two kids and a family, and at my age.

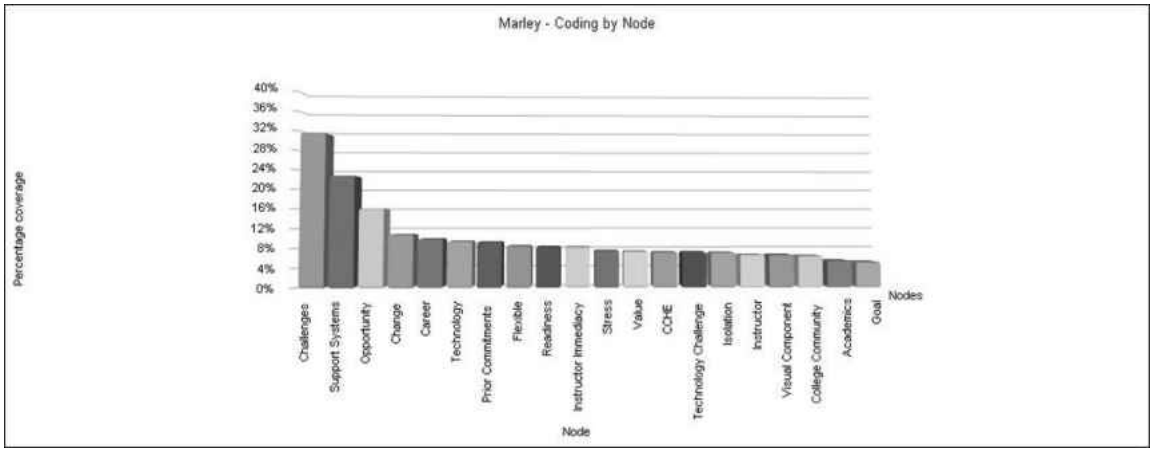


Figure 4: Marley Code Designations by Percentage of Discussion

Brief Summary of Marley

Challenges and support systems played a primary part in Marley's education, but again the priority was different than that of the focus group. The most critical factor for Marley was her support systems at 32%, followed by challenges at 23%. Like Emerson, opportunity was also important, at 16%. Other influencing factors were more equalized as seen in Figure 4. Chapter IV will address the findings in more detail.

Reese

Reese had always wanted to go to college, but knew that it would not work while she was living in Cook County. The travel time to the campus was a barrier, especially coupled with her responsibilities as a mother and wife. Her husband's employment required travel time occasionally, so until her children were old enough, she would not even consider college. When the opportunity came to complete a degree program here in Cook County, she jumped at it.

> I just wanted to finally do something in my life. I have always wanted to help people that needed help. This was the subject area that is really important to me. Once I found out they [the school] offered it [via distance], that was my direction right there. It was huge, being able to stay home for the little things, like being able to eat, sleep, better health, and no wear and tear on the vehicle. My kids were in school, and I could still go to their sporting events; if I had been traveling, going to school in Duluth, it wouldn't have worked.

Reese felt that the biggest challenge of completing her degree program via distance learning was the absence of a classroom environment. She missed not having immediate access to her instructors, especially if she was working on a project and needed answers right away. She noted that most of her professors were good about getting back to her, but there were exceptions. *"There were a couple of teachers that if I sent them an email, it would take maybe a week to hear back from them. Sometimes you don't have that time."* Reese's frustration with some of her instructors corresponds to Creasey et al.'s (2009) research demonstrating that instructor immediacy is critical to student success.

There were also technological challenges. Although she had a computer at home and her Internet connection was fine for her online classes, it was not strong enough for the video enhanced courses. As a result she spent a lot of time in the computer lab at the

CCHE campus where they had a T-1 connection, although even their connection was not sufficient at times. Like Carson, much of Reese's coursework was delivered using video-based ViVu, and disruption occurred as much as 20% of the time, sometimes not working at all. When that occurred, Reese missed important course content. Her instructors, however, were flexible and made accommodations for these events.

> The instructor would have other students take notes, and they would send it to us by email, or she just let us know what happened. She let us keep on top of our homework for whatever we did miss.

The instructors also made a point of including the off-site students, especially when there were group activities. *"They always made sure we were included, and if we did group discussions, she always made sure that group came up by the [computer] camera."* Reese's experiences were directly opposite those of Avery's (a focus group student), and again illustrated Lee and Busch's (2005) research outlining the value of instructors who embrace distance learning technology and are well-trained in effectively using distance learning course delivery.

Interaction with the other students was excellent. Sometimes Reese was the only student in her class that was off-site, and other times there were several distance locations. Occasionally she had a local (Cook County) classmate who was also taking the same course, and this helped reduce her sense of isolation. In addition, her off-campus classmates were inclusive and always greeted her warmly.

Despite missing the classroom experience, Reese valued her ability to stay in her community while attending school. Although it was a challenge, she was able to continue working while attending classes and accommodate her life schedule with her course demands. Reese also discovered that she liked the learning experience. She had

been nervous about her academic readiness, especially since she had not done well in high school.

> I really wanted to go back to college, but I didn't try very hard in high school, and I thought that would be a really big barrier for me. All the study habits that I never really had . . . once I got into it, it started to get a bit easier. And it might be because I am older now and ready for it.

Reese felt a strong bond with the college and made the effort to travel to the campus occasionally for classes, even though she could have done the course entirely via computer. The instructor had invited her, and she valued the opportunity to feel like she was part of the group. This helped her forge strong friendships with her classmates. Reese noted, "*We stay in touch on Facebook."* She particularly appreciated the support she received from her college supervisor, and felt that the school had been very accommodating throughout her entire degree program. Reese considered herself an alumnus of the college, stating, *"I even bought a school sweatshirt!"* Research demonstrates that the instructor has a critical role in fostering and supporting student motivation (Draves, 1984; Vella, 2002; Wlodkowski, 1993), and in this case also helped Reese make a strong connection with the college.

Friends, family, and colleagues were important supports to Reese, and helped her stay motivated. Her husband was particularly supportive. *"He knew I had homework and was going to be gone in the evenings. He stood by me the whole time."* The program was rigorous, and because she was also working, the demands were overwhelming at times. Reese shared,

> I got to a point a year ago where I thought I just didn't know how much more of this I can do because it was a lot. I just had so much to do. So I took a couple of months off because I just needed a break. I was just physically drained. During that time I thought about it and talked to a few people about it. When I went back I had a whole better outlook.

There were other setbacks along the way. Reese had one class that was so academically challenging that she almost quit in the first week of class. She discussed it with her instructor, who was very encouraging, and told her, *"Just do the work and you'll be fine."* But Reese was not as confident. She spoke with Kirstin [CCHE] who made arrangements for her to meet with a local mentor. Although they only needed to meet a few times, this was the support she needed to get through the course. She also learned something important about herself. She acknowledged, "*Before I would have been too shy to ask for help, and now it is okay to ask."*

Earning her degree has brought change to Reese's life. She observed that going back to school has broadened her thinking. *"I think I have become more open and open-minded."* Reese's shift in thinking aligns with Plimmer and Schmidt's (2007) claim that students broaden their thinking and consider "possible selves" to find added meaning in the process of a career transition (p. 67). Reese is working in a field that is important to her and provides a living wage, and she is considering furthering her education to increase her employment opportunities. "*I want to be able to branch out if there is a need."*

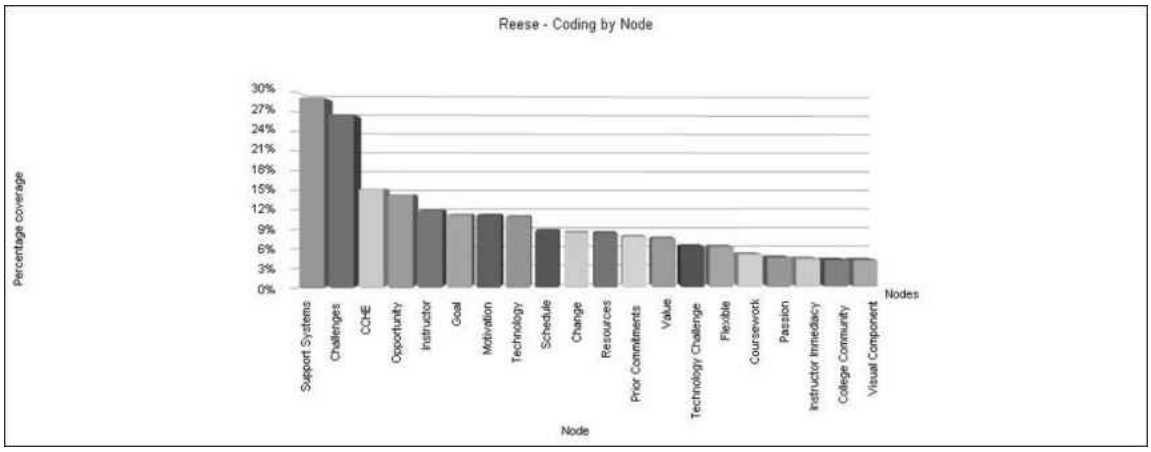


Figure 5: Reese Code Designations by Percentage of Discussion

Brief Summary of Reese

Challenges and support systems played a primary part in Reese's education, but again the priority was opposite that of the focus group. The most critical factor for Reese was her support systems at 29%, followed by challenges at 27%. Like Carson, the two factors provided balance. Also like Carson, CCHE (a subgroup of support systems) was important (15%), and like Emerson and Marley, opportunity (14%) played an important role (see Figure 5). Chapter IV will address the findings in more detail.

Riley

Riley enrolled in a health care program because he had been working in that field, but wanted to advance his career and move it in a new direction. *"I had lots of questions [about my topic of interest], and all of a sudden this program opened up. It was perfect timing."* But he was worried about the academic load since he wanted to stay employed while attending school. And he had heard that being an older adult would compromise his ability to concentrate and he had struggled with concentration and distractions when he had attended college twenty years prior.

> When I went to college the first time I didn't finish because I kept getting distracted. When I was researching something, I would be distracted by something else I would stumble across. When I first went to school I changed majors a lot. So that [concentration and distraction] was a serious concern.

Kasworm's (2010) research with non-tradition on-campus learners revealed similar concerns regarding age, and almost all of the students in this study expressed this concern at some point. As Kasworm observed, adult students are aware that their age could be an issue, but do not regard it as a serious barrier to their ability to succeed in their academics.

Riley began by taking some general education courses. "*It boosted my GPA and [helped me] get the study skills down."* To his delight he received high marks, which helped him get into the health care program. And he discovered that he loved the learning. *"I just truly loved the learning. It was like spending three years solving puzzles."*

Riley's degree program was a hybrid program that required some on-campus time. He and his cohort of learners would take time to have fun when they had to go to the campus; they would spend time getting to know the community and have fun together. This was an important break for Riley because he was working 40 to 60 hours a week. As he put it, "*I had no social life."* At one point he reduced his hours to 20 hours a week during one semester because of the campus requirements. The demands were enormous, but Riley had strong support from his wife.

> I would say "Oh, I can't do this anymore" and my wife would say, "Yes you can." And I would look at co-workers who had taken the class the previous year, and I thought – that person made it through, then I can. I really wanted to do it. I would look at one semester, and then get excited about what was coming up.

CCHE, as the liaison between the college and the students, was critical to his success, but Riley did not need much direct support. *"You [CCHE] stayed out of the way, and you were always positive and cheerful no matter what. You guys do a great job."* He also had the support of his classmates. *"We really got to know a lot of the on-campus students . . . [from the times we were on-campus]. It really helped bring the whole program together."* Like Marley and Reese, Riley found real value in experiencing the physical college campus.

Riley also valued the anonymity of the online courses. He liked that you only knew each other by what was written and expressed, and this reduced making value

judgments on appearances or gender. At the same time he was appalled to discover that some students were cheating by plagiarizing research articles. He recognized the works from articles he had researched to write his own paper, and was dismayed to see them submitted by some students.

Technology was not a challenge for Riley, but instead a valuable resource. He had his own computer, although because it was a Mac some of the CDs that were included with his text books were not compatible with his operating system. "*Luckily I could use my wife's computer."* He took full advantage of online resources such as Google Scholar, and used his iPhone applications to take mini quizzes on various health care topics.

Riley set high standards for himself and for his instructors. He disliked the inconsistencies displayed by some of the instructors, and mentioned an instance where one instructor was overly critical with some students and overly lenient with others. In addition, Riley found it frustrating when an instructor required the newest edition for a course but did not incorporate the new information into the online content or the tests.

> My psychology instructor told everyone to get the 7th edition. My classmate had the 6th edition, and we would study together. We discovered that the tests were obviously based on the 6th edition. He [the instructor] hadn't updated his tests! The last chapter of the 7th edition was 20 pages longer and dealt with end of life issues and talked about "the good death", which was a newer concept. Free from pain, free from worry, Hospice, palliative care, dying with dignity and a feeling of accomplishment – they were all missing from the 6th edition. A huge gap. We discussed it in the online discussions.

Kasworm's (2010) research with on-campus students enrolled in programs with rigorous academic standards echoed Riley's complaint. Kasworm states that "adult students held high expectations for the quality of faculty performance and of classroom instructional experiences" (p. 154). Riley's frustrations were balanced with his many

positive interactions with instructors. Riley commented that one of the on-campus instructors, *"knew her stuff, she had high energy, and she gave me the most positive reinforcement."* Another instructor he valued for her depth of knowledge, *"Just unbelievable!"* The local instructor was available anytime his cohort had need, and he discovered that the college campus instructors were equally accessible. E-mail provided quick communication, but he would also make an effort to contact them in person when he was on the campus. *"Any instructor, if you really needed to get a hold of someone, you could."* Riley's emphasis on instructor availability and immediacy further reinforces Creasey et al.'s (2009) claims that instructor immediacy is critical to student success.

One drawback with the distance learning program was the time lag for getting grades back when test papers had to be mailed. If they took the test on the campus it would be posted the same day, but when it was mailed it could take a week "*which is an eternity, especially if you are on edge about your grades."* The online courses that had tests online were swift to grade their tests. Sometimes Riley had his results within an hour.

The local availability of the program outweighed the drawbacks. Riley said he would not have been able to enroll in the program if it had not been offered locally. *"That was a big thing – to be able to take it here."* He was also pleased to find out that the program is highly regarded. *"Employers say that when they hire someone from that college they seem to stand out from someone hired who attended a different school."* And the on-campus instructors were impressed by the skills the students had as a result of the local health care instruction the students had received in Cook County.

> Now that I am done I miss it, but I went to an area hospital last summer and took an advanced systems class – that was really good – and I am reading journals now. I am trying to be up to date.

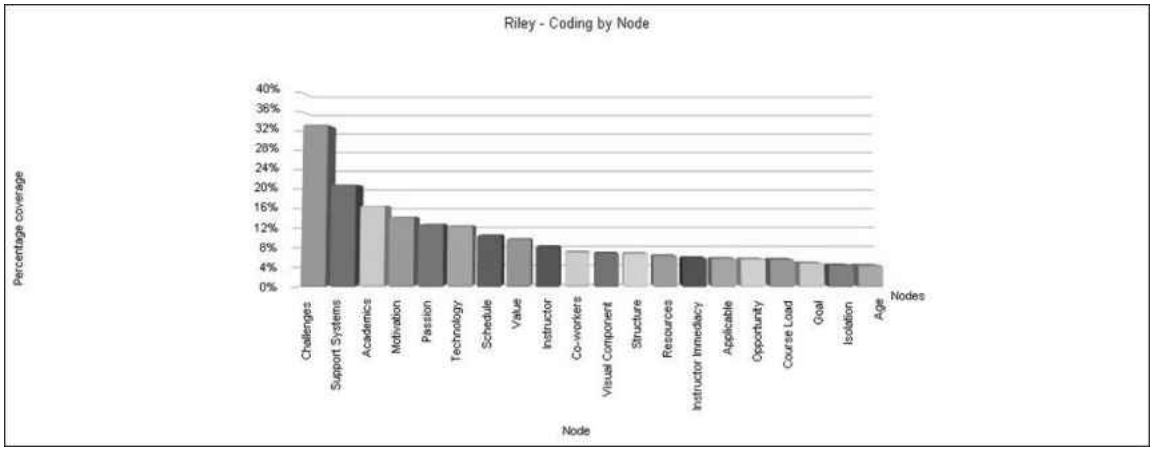


Figure 6: Riley Code Designations by Percentage of Discussion

Brief Summary of Riley

Challenges and support systems played a primary part in Riley's education, but this time the priorities were similar to that of the focus group. The most critical factor for Riley was challenges at 33%, followed his support systems at 21%. The ratio is almost identical to that of the focus group. In contrast to the focus group Riley's third ranked issue was academics (17%), followed by motivation factors at 14% (see Figure 6). Chapter IV will address the findings in more detail.

Sophia

Sophia enrolled in a health care program that included local face-to-face courses and online course requirements. Although she already had a degree, it was not in a field that was employable in a small rural community.

> I was working various part time jobs, nothing very fulfilling, so when the opportunity came to go back to school with a program I was interested in, I was excited. It gave me the opportunity to do something meaningful not only to myself, but also to the community. I thought it was a good fit.

Sophia was part of a cohort of learners. As a result, she had a strong network of support with her classmates and local instructors. She also regarded her past degree experience an important asset. Sophia observed that although it took some time to get back into her study habits, but she loved learning and did not anticipate experiencing challenges with the coursework.

Like Carson and Emerson, Sophia felt scholastically prepared for her academic agenda. The biggest challenge was juggling her schedule. *"It was a lot of late night studying to juggle family and kids."* When she began her degree program she was working part-time, but half way through the degree program she quit her job to devote full attention to her studies.

Another challenge was the technology. Although she had a computer at home, she only had dialup Internet access. As a result, she spent a lot of time at the CCHE campus for projects, testing, and taking classes with real-time video content. Sophia was not entirely comfortable with her computer skills, so the online courses were a new experience.

> I would not have said my computer skills were excellent, so that intimidated me a bit, and one of our classes was computer concepts, so I felt - was frightened. It went well, and I learned a lot, but all that stuff [was unfamiliar].

And she had difficulty communicating with one of the instructors. She explained, *"Problems that arose in class were sent by email, and I didn't get clear answers back."* Like Marley, however, she highly valued the online discussions. *"It seemed like I would get more out of those than a real classroom where they [quiet students] might be inhibited to respond the way they would online."* Sophia noted that most of her instructors were timely with assignments and grades. There were weekly quizzes, with

results posted within a day or two. *"I think it was a good way to learn. A lot of the material we could go through at our own pace and I appreciated that."*

Sophia's husband was extremely supportive while she was in school, taking over tasks at home in addition to his full time employment. This was important since her course work was going to bring additional financial burdens on the family. Her extended family and friends were supportive of her scholastic endeavor, although not at first.

> They thought I was crazy. They didn't think it was the right time, because the kids were little, and because of the finances. After I started they were supportive, but before that I had to be my own cheerleader.

Kasworm (2008) said this situation is common among adult learners. According to Kasworm, adult students "often experience issues with family, coworkers, and key friends who are not supportive of this new involvement and its demands (pp. 28-29).

Sophia mentioned that there were several key people at the college that helped her with her class schedule, ordering books, and navigating the financial aid process. On a local level, the instructor for the cohort created a core of support within the Cook County community, and Sophia valued the feedback she received from those individuals. While she had expected some of her courses to be difficult, especially anatomy and physiology, she discovered that she was interested in the topic now – something she had not expected. And CCHE provided study skills and mentor support as needed. In one instance, Sophia needed help with a business plan assignment.

> Kirstin [CCHE staff] took a lot of time to work with me on my business plan and helped to explain certain elements of it. I would say that her help was really important to me for several reasons. First, I did not have much knowledge of what really goes into a business and she helped explain a lot of the details and lingo – something that I did not get out of the text or through the online instructor. Also, coming up with a business plan that pertained to this area was a real help with understanding what it would take to set up my own business in this county and the reality of it. While I am not working to the scale of my business plan, it

> helped immensely with my confidence of knowing that I have something to work with one day. And I got an A on the project!

Sophia was motivated to follow through with the program because she was ready to make a change in her life to do something she really valued.

> I think just coming back to school and actually knowing what you want after school is a big motivator to actually make you do it. I wasn't worried about the time span since I had been in school - I had the confidence to learn – that I was good at it. The real key to distance learning or any kind of learning in general is being passionate about what you are going after, because if it's not something you really want to do, it's not worth it.

Sophia concluded,

> I look back and am thankful the program came along when it did. Being in a remote area, there aren't a lot of opportunities for employment for doing what you really enjoy doing. I have achieved my goal and am serving the community.

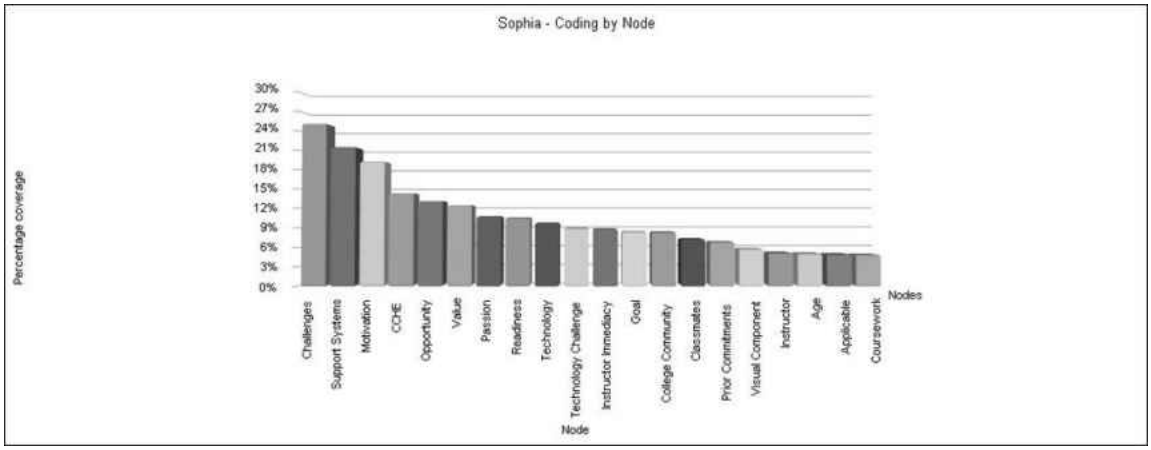


Figure 7: Sophia Code Designations by Percentage of Discussion

Brief Summary of Sophia

Challenges and support systems played a primary part in Sophia's education, and like Riley the priorities were similar to that of the focus group. The most critical factor for Sophia was challenges at 25%, followed by support systems at 21%. These two issues were more in balance than the focus group and Riley. Like Emerson, motivation

(19%) ranked third for Sophia followed by CCHE (a subgroup of support systems) at 14% (see Figure 7). Chapter IV will address the findings in more detail.

Logan

CCHE has a very high completion rate among its student population. As a result, few students who had withdrawn from programs were available to participate in this study. In addition, research indicates that it is difficult to persuade students who have withdrawn to participate in surveys or other forms of research (Assiter & Gibbs, 2007). I felt fortunate that Logan was willing to participate in this study. His responses aligned with Assister and Gibbs' (2007) research which revealed that most students have more than one reason for withdrawing from a degree program.

Logan enrolled in a health care program that had been a life-goal, but had not been possible prior to the opportunity presented by CCHE. Although he already had a degree, like Sophia his degree was not in an employable field for a small rural community. As an older adult he was concerned that he would have a problem being disciplined about his school work. He was also worried about being responsible to his many other commitments, which included his wife, his employer, and other commitments at home. *"I was able to do that. There were some limitations and restrictions, so you become much more organized for your day to day activities."*

Since it had been such a long time since he had taken college classes, he was surprised to discover that he was an excellent student. *"I thought I would be better, but I didn't think I would be a LOT better than I was! I didn't think I'd be an honor student."* Like Emerson, Logan liked the school format, with achievable short term goals. He liked learning subjects thoroughly and then going on to the next semester.

> There was some trepidation – can I do this still? And I found out I could. It wasn't much of a concern. I could do it, even holding down a job and all my responsibilities. I can't say it was easy, or not stressful, or pulling at me from several different directions at a time, but I had pretty good support at home, and that was important.

As part of a cohort program Logan had local students as classmates, and they formed a strong bond and were supportive of each other. Although he did not build the same close bonds with his online classmates, he enjoyed the online discussions which sometimes became friendly conversations. Some of the online students he met when the cohort had on-campus sessions, and this deepened the friendships. While he valued the rapport he had with the students, Logan was surprised at the relationships he experienced with the instructors.

> Being an older student, I was a contemporary of a lot of my instructors. And in some cases I was the age of their parents. The first time I was in college I thought [my instructors] were these mental giants that would grace me [with their presence and their knowledge]. This time they were accessible. And we had a lot of similar experiences.

Although he was building friendships with the students, he did not feel a strong bond with the college. Like Emerson, this was not something he was seeking or needed at this stage of his life. He described the campus as simply, *"It was just a place to go. There wasn't the connection you would have at a brick and mortar place on a full time basis."*

Technology challenges were minimal. He had always been comfortable using the Internet for personal research, so he felt comfortable with the academic requirements. Logan elected to upgrade his dialup Internet access to a satellite connection so he could do his schoolwork at home. This minimized travel time and made him more accessible to his family.

His biggest challenges were the financial burden, and feelings of guilt for putting off family commitments. Logan disliked the loss of his free time, but realized he needed to make some sacrifices. *"I assumed it was temporary, but several years of temporary when you are older is different than several years of temporary when you are 20 years old."* Although other students in the study expressed age as a concern, Logan's comments conveyed a more deep-rooted concern that exemplified Erickson's life development theory: the transition from middle adulthood (ages 30s through 50s) to late adulthood (Santrock, 2002).

> A time of declining physical skills and expanding responsibility; a period in which people become more conscious of the young-old polarity and the shrinking amount of time left in life; a point when individuals seek to transmit something meaningful to the next generation; and a time when people reach and maintain satisfaction in their careers. (p. 479)

This is a key time for adults to experience the incentive of higher education. Thus age itself can serve as a motivating factor that will drive an adult to seek education to achieve desired goals, or be viewed as a barrier to achieving goals.

Logan's support systems consisted of his college advisor, his wife and family, and his local cohort of students. Although he had received a lot of support from CCHE at the start of the program, he did not seek ongoing assistance, and if he had academic questions he depended on his local cohort or brought up the question in online discussion groups. The instructors responded to questions via email. His advisor had been the most help. *"She was there right from the beginning and available even if I didn't have her for class. I was in contact."* His extended family played a key role in supporting his dream of a health care career.

> They were pretty proud of me, and it was a little bit of a blow to them when I pulled out of the program. It was, to them, an abrupt end. I just said, "I am done

> with this." My prospective employers said, "I think you're a good fit for this, for us." They would have taken me part time, but I had taken it to the point where I was just toast. If I had been a bit more honest with myself – I don't know how I could have changed it or approached it differently. And I could have taken more time, but at my age, I don't think I can take much more time for anything and I had to narrow my focus. I was just burnt out, and I took it all the way to the end of that and kept pushing and pushing, and I was just down to the last drop of gas and collapsed. I said, "I just can't do it."

Logan had begun the degree program because it had engaged his interest and he had the intention of following it through with a career in the health field. In retrospect, he wondered if he would have finished if there had been a broader range of career options. The local employment openings were good, but would also make large demands on his time and energy. *"If I had had the option of going somewhere else to pursue the career, there were a lot of other aspects that would have fit my lifestyle better."* He noticed that the employees looked stressed, and while they appeared to like the job demands, he did not want to be governed by his job. *"I've worked too long and hard for what I do have, and I'm not willing to give that up."*

Logan's advisor encouraged him to stay in the program and told him not to worry about the school debts, but he was uncomfortable with that scenario. *"I could see that if I were 25 or 35, I wouldn't have to worry about the financial load, but at this point, I'm getting too old to go deeper in debt."*

Like Reese, he took time to talk to others about his decision and took some time off. But at that point he had already withdrawn from the program and made a firm decision to change directions. Yet he did not regard his academic experiences as wasted. He was gratified to discover that he could be successful as a student, to be an honor

student. *"It was hard work. I wouldn't tell someone that it isn't going to be work."*

When asked if he had advice to offer, he laughed and said,

> Don't give up. I have actually, hopefully, inspired a couple of younger people to enroll. A lot of them have jobs, kids, and families. When you are young, you can pick away at it and take longer, depending on the program. Just do your part, and pick the rest up later. Don't quit, just keep picking away.

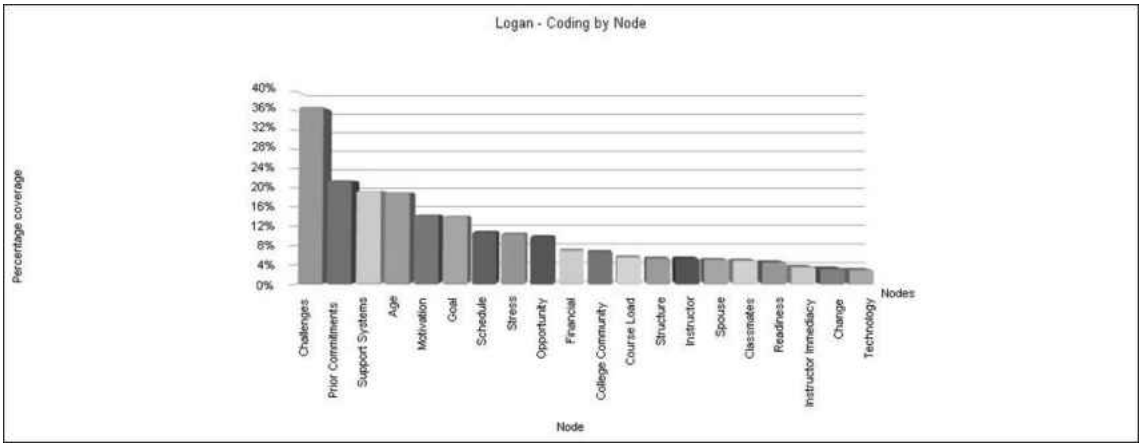


Figure 8: Logan Code Designations by Percentage of Discussion

Brief Summary of Logan

Challenges and support systems played a primary part in Logan's education, but his priorities were quite different than any of the other students. The most critical factor for Logan was challenges at 37% (the highest of any of the students) followed by prior commitments (a subgroup of challenges) at 21%. Three other students mentioned prior commitments as a factor, although it comprised less than 10% of their interviews. Support systems (19%) ranked third for Logan, followed by age (another subgroup of challenges) at 19% (see Figure 8). All of the other students mentioned age as a factor, but it comprised 6% or less of their interviews. Chapter IV will address the findings in more detail.

Summary

Chapter III presented distance learning from the rural student's perspective as revealed by the data collected from the methods and procedures used in this study. Narratives were used to describe the six individuals who participated in the focus group session and the seven individuals who participated in the individual interviews, which formed the basis of the grounded theory results that emerged from the data. Chapter IV presents a comprehensive analysis of the grounded theory data by merging the focus group discussion and individual interview data to present a summary of the data with respect to the literature. Chapter V presents a summary, assertions, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA WITH RESPECT TO THE LITERATURE

Overview of the Methodology

All of the focus group and individually interviewed participants in this study were asked similar questions. The data was gathered from demographic information provided by each participant prior to the interviews and the verbatim interview sessions transcribed by the researcher. As recommended by Charmaz (2010), an interview guide was used to direct the conversation, yet comprised of questions that provided the opportunity for participants to voice their views and experiences.

Identifying Themes and Integrating the Data

As the data was collected, transcribed, analyzed, and coded, the codes emerged into 19 categories that developed into themes (see Table 1). I calculated the frequency of response to each factor by median and mean as a percentage of the interview. i.e.: a 20% response indicates 20% of the interview dealt with that particular issue. Because of extreme high and low responses for some categories I elected to use the median response as most representative of the participants as a whole, but I included both percentages in Table 1 so the reader can see the similarities and differences. The categories are ranked from top to bottom as highest response by median to lowest response by median. I also named the participants who had the highest and lowest responses, which I will refer to

when describing each category in more detail. The ten gray categories in Table 1 were factors mentioned by all participants.

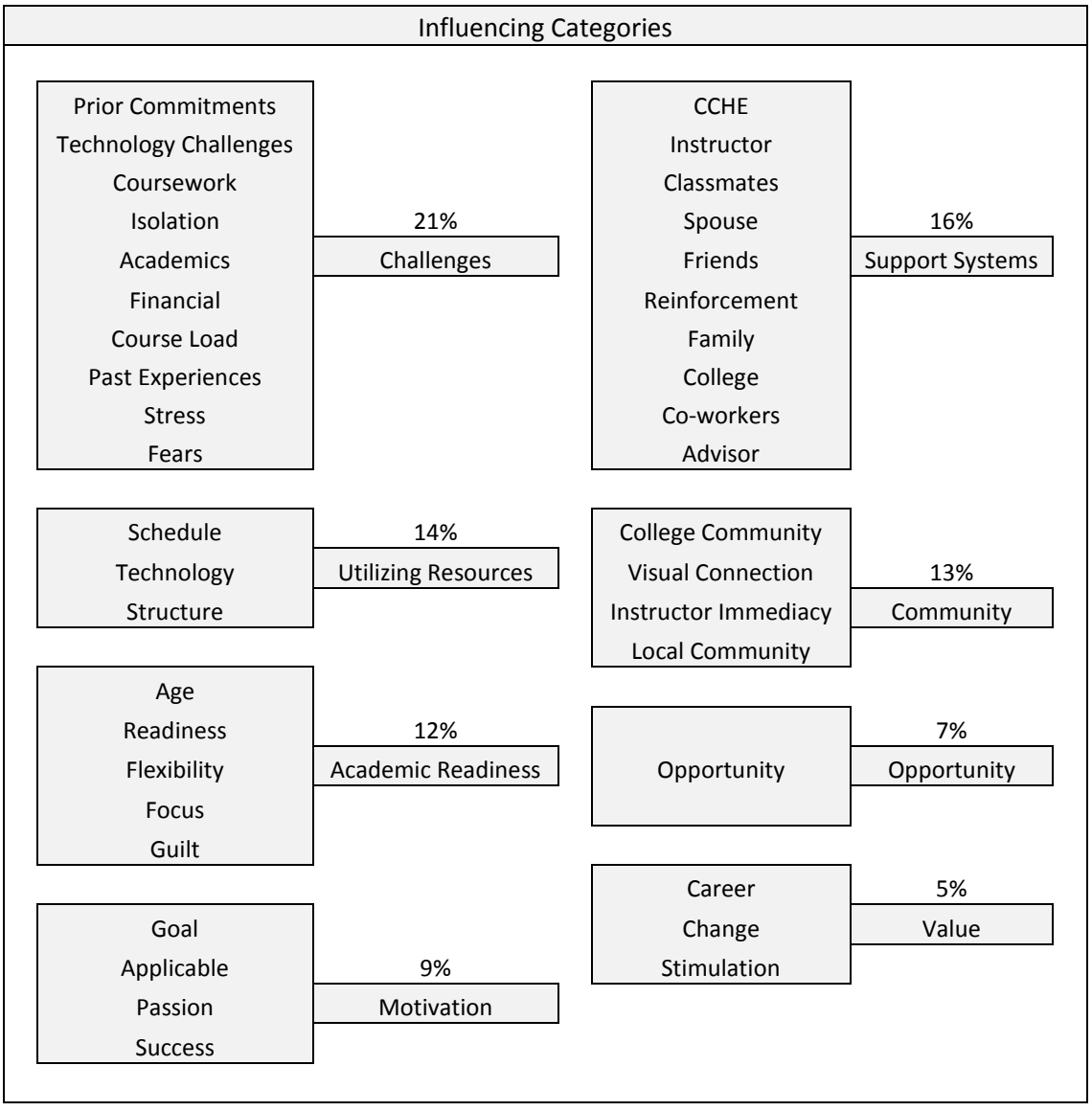
Table 1. Percentage of Response to Influencing Codes/Factors

	Percentage of Response		Participants	
Factor	**Median**	**Mean**	**Highest % Response**	**Lowest % Response**
Challenges	21%	18%	Logan	Emerson
Support Systems	16%	18%	Carson	Logan
Motivation	9%	9%	Sophia	Marley
Opportunity	7%	8%	Marley	Focus group
Schedule	6%	6%	Logan	Marley
Technology	6%	5%	Riley	Carson
College Community	5%	5%	Carson	Riley
Age	4%	3%	Logan	Reese
Academic Readiness	4%	4%	Sophia	Focus group
Visual Connection	4%	3%	Riley	Carson
Career	3%	4%	Marley	Riley
Change	3%	3%	Marley	Riley
Instructor Immediacy	3%	3%	Sophia	Focus group
Flexibility	2%	3%	Marley	Emerson
Structure	2%	2%	Riley	Carson
Focus	1%	1%	Focus Group	Marley
Guilt	1%	1%	Logan	Marley
Local Community	1%	1%	Sophia	Focus group
Stimulation	1%	1%	Marley	Sophia

Sixteen of the 19 codes/factors stood alone, and the top three (challenges, support systems, and motivation) had sub-codes/factors: challenges and support systems each had ten factors, and motivation had four factors. I was interested to note that support systems appeared to provide some balance for the challenges facing rural distance learners, but I was concerned that having some of the codes/factors as grouped categories was skewing the percentages of response per category, so I further grouped 15 of the codes/factors into 4 categories: academic readiness, community, utilizing resources, and value. The

remaining code/factor, opportunity, I elected to leave as a stand-alone category since it did not fit any of the other categories (see Table 2). The factors within each category are ranked by priority. Percentages in the following tables and pie charts do not always equal 100 due to rounding to the nearest whole number.

Table 2. Integrating Influencing Codes/Factors into Categories



The integrated categories portrayed in Table 2 present a better overall view of factors influencing rural distance learners and the components that define each category,

and clearly identify the subcategories within challenges, support systems, and motivation. The eight integrated categories are generally accepted terms used in motivation literature (Bye et al., 2007; Creasey et al., 2009; Elliot, 1999; Finch, 2004; Levy, 2006; Pekrun, 2006; Rovai, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schunk, 1991; Weiner, 1990). The pie chart in Figure 9 displays the percentage of influence each integrated factor played in the role of rural distance learning students. Integrating the factors shifted the emphasis areas, although challenges and support systems remained the most critical issues for rural distance learners. The top five priorities identify the rank ordering of the factors that influence a rural distance learner's experience, confirming Rovai's (2003) assessment that "there is no simple formula that ensures student persistence" (p. 12).

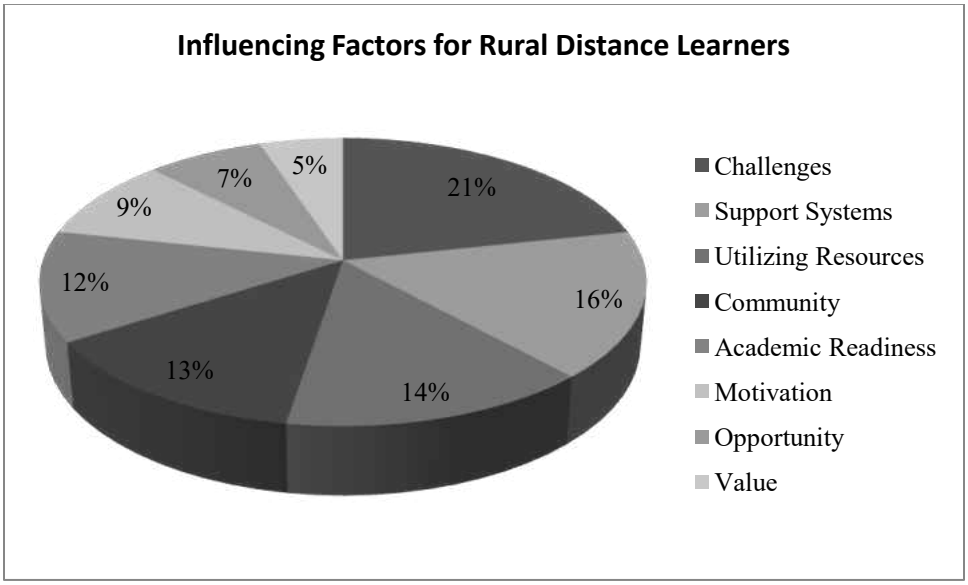


Figure 9. Integrated Categories: Influencing Factors

Influencing Factors for Rural Distance Learners

Challenges

Challenges comprised 21% of issues described by rural distance learners, and according to this research project was the most critical issue facing rural distance learning

students. Challenges, as identified by the study participants, are defined as factors that impeded rural distance learner motivation and persistence. The pie chart in Figure 10 illustrates the specific challenges identified by the study participants. The top four challenges were prior commitments (20%), technology challenges (18%), coursework (13%), and isolation (10%). Coursework, which the students defined as specific course content, differs from academics, which the students identified as their entire degree program.

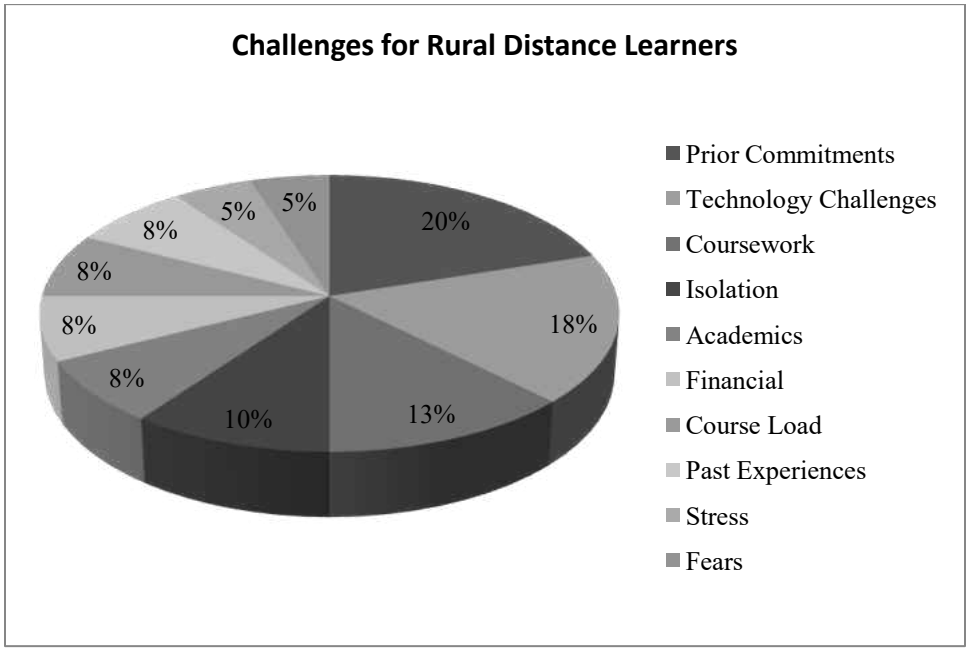


Figure 10. Challenges for Rural Distance Learners

Prior Commitments

Prior commitments comprised 20% of challenge factors for rural distance learners. Results from the 2004 ACT survey of college institutions indicate that the amount of financial aid awarded to students is regarded as the most influential factor a college can implement to increase retention rates (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Yet according to the rural distance learners I interviewed, financial support was regarded as a

challenge, but ranked 6th in level of importance - only 8% of challenges as a whole. Levy's (2006) research maintains that outcome values may be more important than what the course costs. This indicates that rural distance learners recognize that prior commitments presents a greater challenge to a rural distance student's learning experience than financial outlay, and may be illustrating a shift in student priorities, possibly due to an increase in working adults in the distance learner population (Allen & Seaman, 2010). It is commonly believed that students blame high tuition as a barrier to college enrollment.

This study supports the conclusion that when students are serious about returning to college they are primarily concerned about time commitments. A rural distance learning student must juggle family commitments and employment with academics (Park & Choi, 2009). If a student has too many prior commitments, they run the risk of overload, which was demonstrated by Logan. He ranked challenges higher than any other student (over 37% of the interview addressed challenges; see Figure 8, Chapter III). Logan eventually withdrew from his course of study. Logan's experience correlates to a recent study conducted by Perry, Boman, Care, Edwards, and Park (2008) that explored distance student withdrawals from an online graduate level nursing program in Canada. Their results revealed that students cited included feeling "taxed to the limit" by their personal responsibilities and that "the competing pressures of work and school were not something that could be managed in tandem" (p. 8).

Technology Challenges

Technology challenges were the second most critical factor, comprising 18% of challenge factors for rural distance learners. These challenges were comprised of

difficulties navigating the course learning platform, limited access to high speed Internet connection, and technological difficulties with web-delivered video courses. The latter issue was a combination of insufficient band width from their learning location, insufficient band width from the instructor's location, instructor training shortfalls, and instructor opposition to using technology for course delivery.

Technology challenges result in a feeling of helplessness for rural distance learners. They feel cut off from their classmates, their instructor, and the institution, which intensifies their sense of isolation. In this regard, technology challenges become a factor that the institution alleviates through support services, and all of the institutions had support services in place for the student to access. The focus group discussion and individual interviews, however, revealed that the students were often unaware of the available technology support services or did not know how to access those services. Research supports this dilemma, which reveals that some distance learners discover "that they did not have the computer knowledge and levels of support required to study online" (Perry et al., 2008, p. 8). Bruckman (2004) states, "technology is just one component of a socio-technical system – a combination of people, social practices, new and old technologies designed to support learning" (p. x). Bruckman (2004) suggests that "designers begin with learner needs and choose technologies to meet those needs" (p. x).

Coursework

Coursework comprised 13% of challenge factors for rural distance learners. Coursework challenges overlapped with technology challenges, such as the need to catch up on portions of interactive courses that were missed due to technology disruptions during course content delivery, or because of challenges associated with difficulties

navigating the course web site. Other coursework challenges dealt with course content directly. Math, sciences, and writing requirements were most commonly cited as challenging to rural distance learners.

Isolation

Isolation comprised 10% of challenge factors for rural distance learners. Isolation as described by the study participants included missing campus camaraderie and the ability to spontaneously get together and talk about classes, and the feeling of being entirely alone. Two of the students shared that they valued the anonymity of the distance learning environment, but they were the exception. Student achievement research in the distance learning environment revealed that isolation and self-doubts were the most debilitating to student motivation, which is countered when students feel connected to the college and college community (Keller, 1999; Rovai, 2003).

Other Challenges

Other challenges for rural distance learners were academics (the challenge of the entire degree program), financial, course load (the number of courses a student carried), and past experiences (negative educational experiences), which each comprised 8% of challenges; stress and fears each comprised 5% of challenges. Individually these items are not significant. Collectively, however, they comprise 42% of challenges, and emphasize Rovai and Wighting's (2005) observation that "multiple factors can contribute to lower online persistence rates" (p. 98).

Challenges Summary

Challenges for distance learners are comprised of three components: factors a college can control (internal), factors a college cannot control (external), and factors that

have elements of both external and internal influences. Rovai's (2003) Composite Persistence Model (CPM) asserts that internal factors are comprised of social integration, learning styles, and other aspects that are within an institution's control, and external factors are comprised of student health, finances, and other factors beyond an institution's control. Using Rovai's (2003) classifications and CCHE data from this study, rural distance learners would be responsible for 74% of the challenges associated with distance learning (see Table 3).

Table 3. Challenges: Internal and External Supports

Challenges: Internal and External Supports

Internal Challenges		**External Challenges**	
Coursework	13%	Prior Commitments	20%
Academics	8%	Technology Challenges	18%
Course Load	8%	Isolation	10%
Total Internal Challenges	**29%**	Financial	8%
		Past Experiences	8%
		Stress	5%
		Fears	5%
		Total External Challenges	**74%**

Perry et al.'s (2008) study also used Rovai's CPM model as a framework for their analysis, and focused their exploration on students who had withdrawn from online graduate nursing programs for personal reasons as opposed to academic failure. They concluded that "the majority of the reasons for withdrawing reported by participants . . . fit as external factors in Rovai's model" (p. 10). Their external and internal factors were similar to the designations I assigned in my study.

In contrast to Perry et al.'s withdrawal rates research, I explored student persistence and attempted to identify the factors that could jeopardize their persistence.

According to the CCHE rural distance students in my study, the personal, individualized attention each student received provided the necessary support for them to persevere – to stay motivated. Thus, if a portion of external challenges were regarded as shared by the college and the students, the burden could also be shared, as illustrated in Table 4. For instance, the CCHE students affirmed that isolation was alleviated not only by the campus feel of CCHE, but through the interaction they experienced with their online classmates, the relationship they built with their instructor, and support systems provided by the college. Rovai (2003) recommends that institutions utilize as many internal and external components as possible prior to and after admission to improve student retention. Table 4 presents an alternative view of how challenges could be shared by rural distance students and the learning institution.

Table 4. Challenges: Internal, External, and Shared Challenges

Challenges: Internal, External, and Shared Challenges

Internal Challenges		**External Challenges**	
Coursework	13%	Prior Commitments	20%
Academics	8%	Past Experiences	5%
Course Load	8%	Stress	5%
Total Internal Challenges	**29%**	Fears	5%
		Total External Challenges	**35%**

Shared Challenges	
Technology Challenges	18%
Isolation	10%
Financial	8%
Total Internal & External Challenges	**36%**

Support Systems

Support Systems comprised 16% of factors impacting rural distance learners. The pie chart in Figure 11 identifies specific support systems identified by the study

participants. The top four priorities were Cook County Higher Education (CCHE) (21%), Instructor (18%), classmates (13%), and spouse (11%).

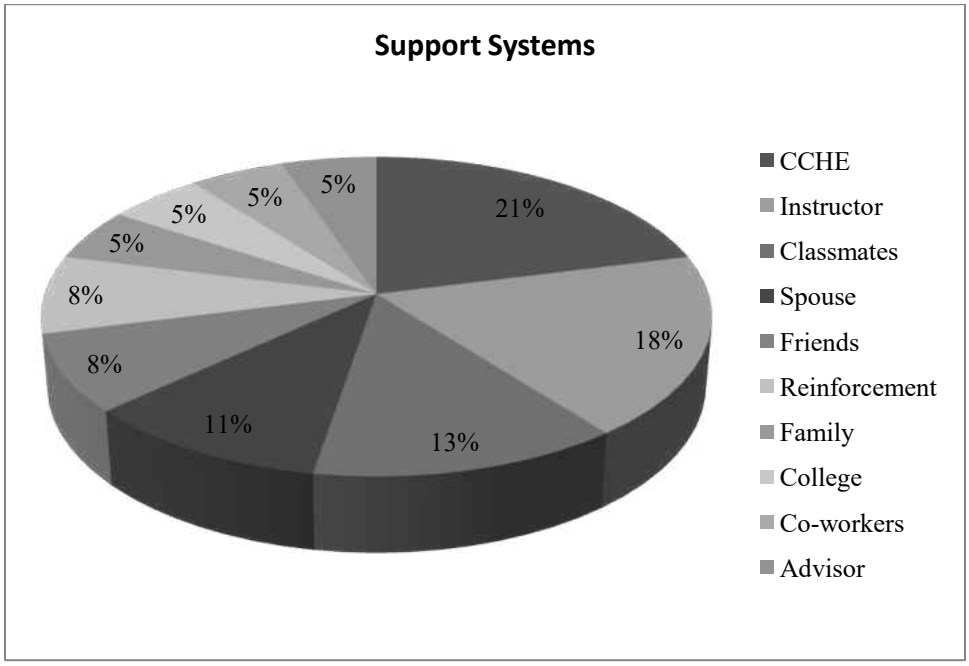


Figure 11. Support Systems: Percentage of Response

Cook County Higher Education – CCHE

CCHE comprised 21% of support system factors for rural distance learners. For the past fifteen years CCHE has served as an advocate for rural distance learners. According to the study participants, this has been a critical support system in their online learning experience. Several of the study participants expressed that they felt helpless and overwhelmed when they first enrolled in their course of study. CCHE students repeatedly commented that they "could not have done this without Higher Ed". The conclusion that many of the CCHE students would not have persisted without CCHE support services is supported by CCHE's 90% student completion rate.

CCHE provides its rural distance learners technology support, study skills, assistance seeking financial aid, and mentoring. According to a Stanford University

study, graduation rates increased 13% when students were coached (Bettinger & Baker, 2011). In addition, there are other benefits to coaching or mentoring. According to research the effects of mentoring persist past the point when the student is no longer being coached or mentored (Bettinger & Baker, 2011). CCHE is proactive about providing mentoring to students by letting students know the service is available, especially during the first few weeks of a course or degree program. This is important, since research has demonstrated that students who are encouraged to receive coaching are more likely to participate, as opposed to programs where the students must take the initiative to seek out a coach or mentor (Bettinger & Baker, 2011).

This type of intense support, regarded as "hand-holding" by some institutions (has proven effective at other institutions (Pittenger & Doering, 2010, p. 276). One of those institutions, the Instructional Technology Office (ITO) at the University of Illinois, Champaign, "endeavors to prevent technology from being a barrier to the educational process" and are "committed to user support and outreach" (Gengler, 2004, pp. 255, 256). They accomplish this by making efforts to have programs and systems that are compatible with different systems (i.e.: Linux and Macintosh), and provide personal one-to-one support to instructors and students. "Whenever our users have a technical problem, we try not only to fix the problem, but to educate the user" (p. 259). This not only solves the immediate problem, but empowers the user.

Instructor

Instructors comprised 18% of support system factors for rural distance learners. Researchers maintain that to build trust and a strong sense of community for the learner it is necessary to foster student to student interactions and student to instructor interactions

(De Gagne & Walters, 2009; Lesniak & Hodes, 2000; Rovai, 2003). Andresen (2009) recommends using discussion groups to build student relationships with fellow classmates and the instructor. According to Andresen, "the instructor's role is one of the most promising mechanisms to establish online learning relationships" (p. 254).

The rural distance learners frequently expressed their appreciation of immediate feedback from their instructors, and missed it when it was absent. Immediate feedback is critical in the distance learning environment (Creasey et al., 2009; Csikszentmihaly, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2007; Brooks, 2003). De Gagne and Walters (2009) assert that, "the identification of a social presence concept implies that online teachers must be *visible* so that students are able to 'see' and 'hear' their instructors" (p. 586). To achieve an optimum online learning environment, instructors need to be well-trained in effectively using distance learning course delivery (Lee & Busch, 2005). Instructors' innovation is also imperative. "Instructors need to find new ways to express emotion or passion for a subject matter" (Andresen, 2009, p. 250).

Instructors are the gate-keepers for online learners, and need to be on the watch for students who are not engaging in the online learning environment. Instructors need to take an active roll to "take steps to pull students back" socially and educationally (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2004, p. 52). In one example, some students in Haythornthwaite et al.'s (2004) study struggled with isolation and the lack of positive (or negative) cues from the online discussion format. A phone conversation with the instructor, however, reduced their feelings of isolation and uncertainty, and emphasized the importance of instructor availability.

Classmates

Classmates comprised 13% of support system factors for rural distance learners, and illustrate the importance of creating a social bond in the online learning environment. According to Haythornthwaite et al. (2004), students in an online environment "form bonds of friendship and share emotional and practical support" (p. 41). It is important for the institution and the instructor to foster these bonds. According to Brown (2004), "students can be encouraged to capitalize on the rich diversity of peer groups" (p. 145). By taking advantage of online peers, learners can benefit from experienced non-traditional learners who can assist the newer online learners, and provide support as needed throughout the course. Haythornthwaite et al. (2004) assert that online learners "require and return different kinds of support at different stages" (p. 38). Students' knowledge and experience of content and process are contributed in the online discussion just as they would in the face-to-face classroom.

The rural distance learners who experienced the strongest bonds with fellow classmates had experienced some form of visual or face-to-face content in their online degree program. In a synchronous classroom, information is immediate and helps create a strong, supportive bond between the classmates (Ruhleder, 2004). Researchers also recommend implementing audio content in asynchronous components of course content, such as introductions, to help create an atmosphere of instructor presence (Dringus, Snyder, & Terrell, 2010).

Spouse or Partner

The spouse category includes married students and students with partners. Spousal support comprised 11% of support system factors for rural distance learners,

which corresponds to Brown's (2004) research claiming that "particular individuals can have a specific, significant impact" on a student's academic growth and development (p. 140). Although Brown's research was for on-campus programs, the claim is pertinent for all learners. Spousal, partner, and family support was critical to the rural distance learners, and is recognized by research as an important component to student persistence. Park and Choi (2009) report that even if an adult student has clear goals and is academically well-prepared, "adult learners are more likely to drop out of online courses when they do not receive support from their family and/or organization while taking online courses" (p. 215).

Other Supports

Friends and reinforcement (each 8%), and family, college, co-workers, and advisors (each 5%) collectively comprised 36% of factors comprising support systems. When these factors are divided into external and internal supports, friends, family, and co-workers comprise 18% of other supports, and the college, advisors, and reinforcement comprise 18% of other supports. This illustrates the balance necessary for rural distance learners to succeed in the online learning environment.

Support Systems Summary

Online learning is still in its formative years, and many institutions are still experimenting with the support systems provided to online learners. Austin (2010) discovered that although administration and faculty may have been supportive of offering online courses and programs, academic advisors were not and were actively advising students against online course enrollment, especially first year students. The institution realized that "training also must be offered and promoted to those who teach, provide

services, or are involved in the enrollment management process at the college or university" (p. 34). Austin (2010) claims building a strong relationship between the student and support services is critical to the student persistence in online programs.

According to Brooks (2003), "universities will also have a high dropout rate if there is not sufficient student support" (p. 2). Brooks also contends that the institution has the biggest responsibility for maintaining a high persistence rate, a burden that is shared between course designers and faculty. Whether this is true is still open to debate, but researchers agree that the university could make improvements in how support systems are provided to online learners (Simpson, 2004; Van Etten, Pressley, McInerbey, & Liem, 2008). "Academic environments that are not so supportive require students to do everything for themselves, increasing the likelihood that students will be overwhelmed" (Van Etten et al., 2008, p. 825).

Austin (2010) emphasizes that advisors and instructors "get to know the students as individuals and be aware of the factors (external and internal) that may influence their experience studying online" (p. 13). This perspective is controversial with higher education institutions. Pittenger & Doering (2010) suggest that most higher education institutions regard a high level of student support as "hand-holding", and implementing these services for their distance learners may not be possible because of financial limitations or general policies. As support, institutions could make recommendations that their distance learners seek out and identify support resources in their community. Like challenges, there are internal and external support system factors that can impact a rural distance learner's motivation and ability to persist: factors a college can control (internal), factors a college cannot control (external) (Rovai, 2003).

Table 5. Support Systems: Internal and External Supports

Support Systems: Internal and External Supports			
Internal Supports		**External Supports**	
Instructor	18%	CCHE	21%
Classmates	13%	Spouse	11%
Reinforcement	8%	Friends	8%
College	5%	Family	5%
Advisor	5%	Co-workers	5%
Total Internal Supports	**49%**	*Total External Supports*	**50%**

Table 5 illustrates that for rural distance learners, internal and external supports are equally divided between what the higher education institution can control (internal supports) and what the rural distance learner can control (external supports). Since internal supports are such a critical component for student persistence, it is imperative that institutions foster programs and policies that promote student support. The instructor, as the first line of communication with a student, is the obvious first choice for establishing a strong relationship with students and for fostering student to student relationships. According to Andresen (2009), "the instructor's role is one of the most promising mechanisms to establish online learning relationships" (p. 254).

Past research has often concentrated on supports, such as technology, that the institution can most easily provide at a distance (Nash, 2005). Unfortunately, the rural distance learners were not always aware of online supports services, or worse, were reluctant to ask for assistance. Researchers mention this problem (Perry et al., 2008; Van Etten et al., 2008), and judging by the broad range of resources available on campus web sites, this is a common problem. Overall, support systems are critical to distance

learners, and because of their isolation and remote locations, rural distance learners in particular.

Utilizing Resources

Utilizing Resources comprised 14% of factors impacting rural distance learners. Following a schedule and technology were two key factors, each 43% of utilizing resources. Structure was also mentioned, and comprised 14% of utilizing resources (see Figure 12).

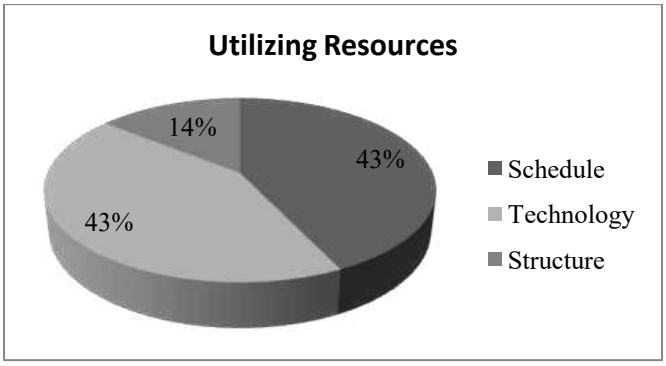


Figure 12. Utilizing Resources: Percentage of Response

Structure could be defined as an element of creating and keeping a schedule, but I included it as a separate category because the participants made a distinction between the two fields. For instance, several students mentioned they valued the structure of their program, which is quite different from maintaining a personal schedule.

Utilizing resources is an almost entirely external factor (student controlled) for rural distance learners. Elements of utilizing resources could be internal (institution controlled) as part of the structure of the degree program, and utilizing technology resources from the institution through access to journal articles through the college library. The study participants did not mention college resources to any extent, but instead referred to resources that they found outside the sphere of college support. For

example, several of the students shared technology resources they used to enhance their study skills, such as using iPhone applications.

Community

Creating a sense of community comprised 13% of factors impacting rural distance learners. According to Rovai (2002), "many factors influence the quality of interaction and thus the sense of community within any distant learning environment" (p. 7). Community is built on reducing the distance between a student and the learning environment, increasing social presence and social equality, and engaging students through activities (Rovai, 2002). The pie chart in Figure 13 illustrates the emphasis areas that influenced rural distance learners. Like the other categories, community can also be divided into internal and external components, but in the case of community the internal influence of the learning institution and educator is much higher than external influences controlled by the student.

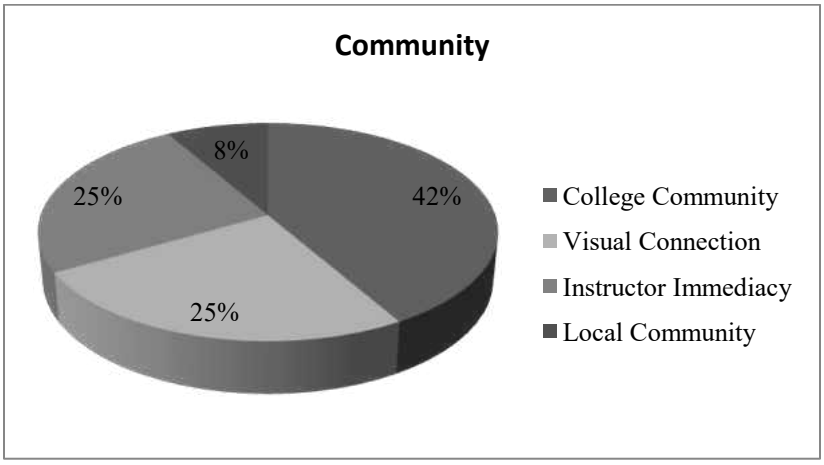


Figure 13. Community: Percentage of Response

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has been attributed to increasing social presence and community in the learning environment and is an important aspect of student perseverance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT includes the importance of belonging,

of being connected and engaged, and relatedness (a reason for the learning) – critical motivators for adult students (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Adult students want their learning to be pertinent and applicable, and one of the best ways to achieve this is with application in the classroom. This actively engages adults to create a dynamic learning environment that will stimulate their attention and reinforce their learning experience (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Buller, 2010; Dewey, 1997). According to Shea, et al., a key component to fostering a college community environment for distance learners is to create a "joint, cooperative pursuit of educational goals, respect for 'cognitive' diversity, and an active role for students" (Shea et al., 2006, p. 176).

Feeling connected to and with an academic community also raises a student's perception of academic control (Creasey et al., 2009; Cross, 1981; Perry, 2003; Rovai, 2002; Skinner, 1984; Vella, 2002; Wlodkowski, 1993). According to Perry (2003), "High academic control fosters a mastery orientation to achievement-striving in students, while low academic control contributes to a helplessness orientation" (p. 325). High academic control and a feeling that the instructor is available and immediate promotes learning, builds community, and reduces the sense of isolation that challenge rural distance learners.

Academic Readiness

Academic readiness comprised 12% of factors impacting rural distance learners. Of that 12%, academic skills and age were of equal importance (each category 33% of academic readiness) to rural distance learners (see Figure 14). Although much of academic readiness occurs prior to enrollment, institutions have been taking a proactive role in preparing students for the rigors of academic life. A study by Robbins, Oh, Le,

and Button (2009) claims that academic skills (AS) are "the most effective intervention for academic performance" (p.1171). They further note that "both motivational control and academic performance are most strongly affected by the AS interventions" (p. 1172).

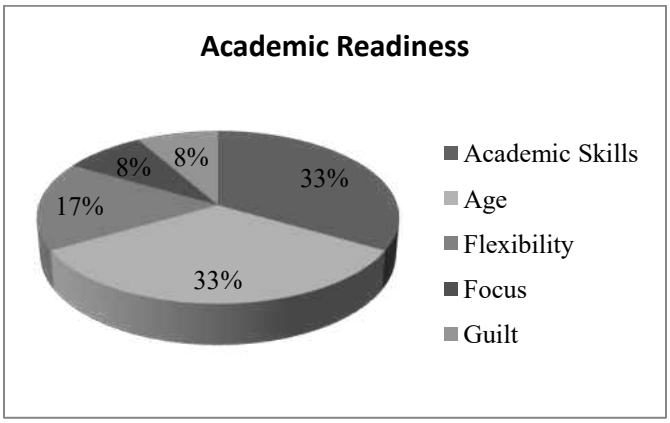


Figure 14. Academic Readiness: Percentage of Response

Academic Skills

Many students begin post-secondary education lacking strong academic skills. Most institutions require academic assessment exams prior to college entrance. The results are used for college placement, in particular for first year students, and indicate a student's competence and readiness for college level work or if remedial classes are required. According to researchers, improving competence increases motivation and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hall et al., 2007; Tsui, 2007).

A student's readiness includes reading comprehension, writing, math, and study skills, and for online students technological skills. Measuring skills is critical because research has demonstrated that "students who lack technical skills related not only to basic computer skills, but also writing and typing skills may become frustrated and drop from the program" (Brooks, 2003, p. 2). Students enrolling in online programs can take an additional test or survey that assesses readiness for learning online. Recent research,

however, has revealed that online aptitude survey instruments are ineffective for predicting student success in the online learning environment (Austin, 2010; Hall, 2009).

Csikszentmihaly et al., (2007) emphasized the importance of creating a "balance between perceived challenges and perceived skills" (p. 601). Balancing challenges and skills is critical for rural distance learners. According to Csikszentmihaly et al., if challenges exceed the skills, students "typically become anxious" (p. 602). Once enrolled, competence can be improved through attributional retraining (AR), which involves helping students consider new options, study skills, positive thinking, and other attributes that increase student performance (Hall et al., 2007). According to Haynes et al. (2009), AR is critical for first year students because AR "helps students reframe the way they think about success and failure by encouraging them to take responsibility for academic outcomes and adopt the 'can-do' attitude" (p. 227).

Age

Age is another influencing factor for adult learners, and comprised 29% of rural distance learners' perspective of their readiness for post-secondary education. According to Erickson's life development theory, middle adulthood (ages 30s through 50s) is a key time for adults to experience the incentive of higher education (Santrock, 2002). Thus age itself can serve as a motivating factor that will drive an adult to seek education to achieve desired goals.

Most of the study participants mentioned age as a potential barrier to their ability to learn, but they all discovered that their fears were unfounded. Although many middle age adults commonly express the fear that they are too old to learn, it is reportedly not until adults reach 75 years of age that other factors may begin to impact their ability to

learn, such as poor health, vision, reaction times, and hearing (Santrock, 2002). According to research, "aspects of the human information processing system deteriorate with age, in particular perception, learning, and memory processes" (Boulton-Lewis, 2010, p. 217).

Even so, researchers claim that the ability to learn and an older adult's level of intelligence has not been compromised enough to warrant serving as a barrier (Cross, 1981; Materna, 2007; Wlodkowski, 1993). The process of learning, or as some researchers state, the practice of learning, has long-term positive effects on an older adult's ageing process (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). Boulton-Lewis (2010) states, "substantial practice effects counteract true declines of ageing and remain significant even with intervals of seven years between tests" (p. 218). She further notes, "given time and sufficient motivation, older adults are able to achieve equivalent learning outcomes to younger learners" (p. 218).

In addition, research indicates that activity actually stimulates learning, which improves quality of life as individual's age (Cross, 1981; Materna, 2007). Rural distance student Logan expressed deep concern regarding his age, and although his fear of whether he was too old to learn was alleviated, his primary concern centered on the wisdom of assuming a large debt load at his age. Kasworm (2010) conducted research on older adult learners, however her study addressed on-campus students and how those students struggled emotionally with being older students in the midst of a younger population of learners. Only Logan and Emerson specifically mentioned the disparity of ages among classmates, and the disparity did not impact their learning experience or ability to communicate with fellow students.

Flexibility, Focus, and Guilt

Flexibility (17%), Focus (8%), and Guilt (8%) were the other three factors comprising Academic Readiness. Flexibility was mentioned by the rural distance learners as a beneficial attribute for the learner and for the instructor. Several of the students mentioned their value of an instructor's willingness to be flexible with the learning environment to assure their quality learning experience. Focus was stressed as a means to stay on their academic track, and linked with age as a positive attribute – most of the rural distance students mentioned that their age and experience helped them stay focused on their goal. Guilt was a factor for three of the students who struggled with juggling their family commitments with their academic schedule. Guilt is a factor for academic readiness because it is important for rural distance students to address their family needs and commitments, "to have them on board" as several of the students mentioned, or it can become a serious barrier to their learning experience.

Academic Readiness Summary

Like the other categories there are internal (institution controlled) and external (student controlled) elements to academic readiness. Higher education assessment tools measuring college readiness are beneficial. Although rural distance learners expressed concerns regarding their readiness, none of the participants in the study were incapacitated by lack of skills, yet some of those who needed assistance were not aware of the available support resources.

Motivation

Motivation comprised 9% of factors impacting rural distance learners. Goals ranked highest for motivation (47%), followed by applicable (24%) and passion (18%).

The lowest motivator was success (12%), which indicates that success was implied as part of the goal and the process of reaching the goal as opposed to success or good grades as an extrinsic motivator. These results support literature claiming that adult learners are more likely to be motivated intrinsically by ideals and concepts (Covington, 2007; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Finch, 2004; Tsui, 2007).

This category demonstrates how difficult it is to identify what motivates learners and adult learners in particular. I coded items as motivators when students specifically mentioned goals and discussed how their passion for the topic drove them to pursue their goal. Fewer students mentioned that success was a motivator, but those who did stated that their success had served as motivation.

Opportunity

Opportunity comprised 7% of rural distance learner responses, and as a stand alone category this percentage is worth noting since without opportunity, none of the students would have enrolled in a degree program. Researchers agree that it is important to make higher education opportunities available to everyone, regardless of their economic status, cultural background, or gender (Austin, 2010; De Gagne & Walters, 2009; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Distance learning programs provide "an opportunity for a large number of students who would not otherwise have that access" (Gibbings, et al., 2010, p. 6).

Value

Although value was regarded as important, especially in light of career opportunities and the potential for personal growth, value itself comprised only 5% of the factors impacting rural distance learners. Like motivation, this was a difficult category to

separately code. Participants mentioned value in conjunction with working towards a new career (43%), bringing change (43%) and the value of stimulation in their learning experience (14%).

In essence, value expressed how rural distance learners felt about his or her degree program. Wlodkowski (1993) refers to value as the affect, or the emotional experience of learning, of being emotionally engaged, and the feelings we experience that are related to success or failure. Emotions are a critical motivation; our emotions sustain our involvement and behavior in the classroom. There are strong links between emotions, feelings, and our subsequent behavior. As Skinner (1984) points out, "Feelings . . . are *immediately* related to behavior" (p. 54). According to Levy (2006), perceived learning, overall satisfaction, and value are important measures of a learner's perceived satisfaction, and can serve as indicators for learners' perceived learning.

Value and motivation are terms designated by researchers as opposed to terms used by rural distance learners. For rural distance learners value and motivation are implied – why else would they be engaged in their degree program if there was no motivation to do so, or no value in the experience?

Summary

Chapter IV presented a comprehensive analysis of the grounded theory data by merging the focus group discussion and individual interview data to present a summary of the data with respect to the literature. Chapter V presents a summary, assertions, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, ASSERTIONS, CONLCUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This grounded theory method research project explored rural students' perceptions of what motivates them to persist in distance learning programs. Adhering to the grounded theory constant comparative framework suggested by Creswell (2007), Charmaz (2010), and Willis (2007), my research explored the following questions:

1. What motivates rural distance learning students to persist?
2. What support resources do rural distance learning students need to complete their course of study?

Results from this study could be used to implement distance learning support services in other rural communities, disseminate the information to other institutions in the hopes of increasing retention rates across the nation, and foster continued success for CCHE students. My rationale was premised on the assumption that providing support resources contributes to higher retention rates.

Overview of the Methodology

This study comprised thirteen rural distance learners: six currently enrolled students, six students who completed degrees, and one student who withdrew. All the participants were selected based on the criterion that they were currently enrolled in, were recent graduates of, or withdrew from an accredited degree program while living and working in Cook County. Participants were selected from a variety of disciplines to

provide comparative analysis over a wide range of conditions and course rigor. As recommended by Charmaz (2010), an interview guide was used to direct the conversation, yet comprised of questions that provided the opportunity for participants to voice their views and experiences. Individual interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to assure accuracy. Focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding were applied to the transcribed data (Charmaz, 2010; Creswell, 2007; Willis, 2007). Constant comparative analysis was used to develop a grounded theory of the resources required to support motivation and persistence among rural distance learners.

Assertions

Assertion One

Assertion one is rural distance learners need a high level of support services from the learner's institution and local community to balance the extraordinary challenges they face due to their remote location and limited access to support services.

Brooks (2003) contends that the learning institution has the biggest responsibility for maintaining a high persistence rate, a burden that should be shared between administration services, course designers, and faculty. Researchers agree that the university could make improvements in how support systems are provided to online learners (Simpson, 2004; Van Etten et al., 2008). "Academic environments that are not so supportive require students to do everything for themselves, increasing the likelihood that students will be overwhelmed" (Van Etten et al., 2008, p. 825). Only one of the students in this study (Emerson) mentioned not needing CCHE services when she enrolled in her second program because the institution she was working with took care of registration details, which she described as "removed a barrier" and "eased the path". It

is also possible that some of her comfort with the distance learning environment may have derived from her prior successful experience in which CCHE provided a high level of support (Emerson described CCHE as "life savers") and the knowledge she gained learning how to navigate the online learning environment.

It is possible that without the support services provided by CCHE some of the rural distance learners would have located the online services provided by the college or university, however the students' own descriptions and experiences indicate this is unlikely. Even the most independent and self-sufficient of the study participants confessed to feeling lost and confused by the distance learning format, and expressed relief at being able to utilize CCHE support services. If CCHE had not provided support services, however, challenges would have significantly outweighed support services, and increased the likelihood that the rural distance learners would have withdrawn from their course of study. Logan was the only participant in the study to provide evidence that a high level of challenges can result in withdrawal, but researchers support this claim (Brooks, 2003; Perry et al., 2008; Simpson, 2004). According to Simpson, (2004), "the key to retention in any institution is proactive contact or intervention from the institution to its students" (p. 80).

According to Austin (2010), building a strong relationship between the student and institutional support services is critical to student persistence in online programs. The focus group discussion and individual interviews, however, revealed that the rural distance students in this study were often unaware of the support services available through their college or university, or did not know how to access those services. Research supports this dilemma, which reveals that many distance learners discover "that

they did not have the computer knowledge and levels of support required to study online" (Perry et al., 2008, p. 8). CCHE students repeatedly commented that they "could not have done this without Higher Ed", and the personal, individualized attention each student received provided the necessary support for them to persevere – to stay motivated. The conclusion that many of the CCHE students would not have persisted without CCHE support services is supported by CCHE's 90% student completion rate.

Assertion Two

Assertion two is the instructor has to take a pro-active role in supporting his or her students for rural distance learners to be successful.

Student achievement research in the distance learning environment revealed that isolation and self-doubts were the most debilitating to student motivation, which is countered when students feel connected to the college and college community (Keller, 1999; Rovai, 2003). Researchers maintain that to build trust and a strong sense of community for the learner it is necessary to foster student to student interactions and student to instructor interactions (De Gagne & Walters, 2009; Lesniak & Hodes, 2000; Rovai, 2003). According to Andresen, "the instructor's role is one of the most promising mechanisms to establish online learning relationships" (p. 254). In addition , Hartnett, St. George, and Dron (2011) make the important observation that instructors who establish "frequent, ongoing communication with learners . . . are in a better position to accurately monitor and respond to situational factors that could potentially undermine learner motivation" (p. 33).

The rural distance learners frequently expressed their appreciation of immediate feedback from their instructors, and struggled when it was absent. Immediate feedback is

critical in the distance learning environment (Creasey et al., 2009; Csikszentmihaly et al., 2007; Brooks, 2003). De Gagne and Walters (2009) assert that, "the identification of a social presence concept implies that online teachers must be *visible* so that students are able to 'see' and 'hear' their instructors" (p. 586).

The lack of a physical presence in the online learning environment requires innovation and creativity on behalf of the instructor. Technology advances are making this easier. For instance, many of the rural distance learners mentioned the value of a visual exchange with their instructor and classmates – that it helped create a sense of support, connection, and community for each student. Patel and Patel's (2006) case study research revealed that online students gained the perception that their instructor was always available, even thought his office hours had remained the same as they were with the face-to-face students. "The instructor's use of the online platform to support formative learning among students and the students' perception of the ready availability of the instructor even outside the class led to a high level of student motivation" (p. 42).

Limitations of the Study

CCHE is currently a unique institution, so transferability of these achievements may not be possible unless a community without an existing college institution is willing to consider the effort of offering the support services identified within this study. In addition, the demographic information was gathered from a small rural community, which may reduce its correlation to a larger population. However, the study indicates trends, and CCHE's fifteen years of consistent high retention indicate there is value in the results and potential transferability to other locations.

Conclusions

The literature demonstrates that several motivation factors need to be present for adults to pursue an education (Bye, et al., 2007; Cross, 1981; Draves, 1984; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Lee & Busch, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Pintrich, 2004; Rovai, 2003; Vella, 2002; Wiener, 1990). Palloff and Pratt (2007) have identified six elements they consider essential to the online learning environment: honesty (establishing trust), responsiveness (instructor immediacy and presence), relevance (pertinent and applicable), respect (treating online learners as adults with experiences they can contribute), openness (safe), and empowerment (confidence).

Distance learning students, however, not only learn their course content, they are learning how to use new technologies and learning how to interact in an online environment (Haythornthwaite et al., 2004). As a result, learning institutions must learn how to integrate their quality online learning programs with quality support services to sustain learners in the online environment. "The educational opportunities that are created should be responsive to the demands of students and the world in which they work and live" (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 235).

Engstrom and Tinto (2008) claim that access to higher education does not assure individuals the opportunity to enroll in courses or degree programs. Although they are referring to on-campus programs serving low-income students, their message is just as pertinent to distance learning students. They state,

> To promote greater student success, institutions have to take seriously the notion that the failure of students to thrive in college lies not just in the students but also in the ways they construct the environments in which they ask students to learn. Institutions have to believe that all students, not just some, have the ability to succeed under the right set of conditions—and that it is their responsibility to construct those conditions. (p. 50)

The division between an online and an on-campus course is not as clear cut today. Technology has become a daily part of on-campus courses, and hybrid courses combining on-campus time with on-line components are more common. Donaldson and Knupfer (2002), looking at future trends in the technology-enhanced learning environment, state that, "it is imperative that innovation efforts . . . support the curriculum through engaged learning experiences" (p. 43). P. L. Rogers (2002) states, "It is *NOT* the technology that matters, it is how we use it to effectively enhance and facilitate learning" (p. 262). As online enrollment increases access to education, it becomes even more important to offer quality programs regardless of where a student resides.

> Distance technologies cite their potential to reach disabled, homebound, isolated, and economically and educationally disadvantaged students . . . online options take on increased importance to the community. Austin, 2010, p. 33

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

One recommendation is for higher education institutions to assure that distance learning students have access to the same type of support services that are available on a college campus and more direct methods are used to bring these services to the attention of the learners at the time of their enrollment and throughout their course of studies. One solution is to provide face-to-face support resources using Skype, so students have a visual connection with campus services. Another solution is to offer first day orientation to off-campus learners. CCHE offers an online orientation session on the first day of class to assure students are able to access their course, find the syllabus, identify assignments, understand how to use the drop box for submitting assignments, and learn to navigate the course web page. The online orientation session increases student

confidence and provides assurance that students will begin their course without immediate challenges coping with the technology. In addition, the support process reinforces the message that students have a support network, and helps reduce the sense of isolation.

A second recommendation is for higher education institutions to establish support centers at off-campus locations. This research project clearly confirmed the assertion that there is a need for rural distance learners to have a high level of access to support centers – to provide the opportunity for enrollment and to create a sense of immediacy in the distance learning environment. All of the rural students stated that they would not have enrolled in their course of study if CCHE had not been present in the community. Researchers agree that it is important to make higher education opportunities available to everyone, regardless of their economic status, cultural background, or gender (Austin, 2010; De Gagne & Walters, 2009; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Distance learning programs provide "an opportunity for a large number of students who would not otherwise have that access" (Gibbings, et al., 2010, p. 6). Although most learning institutions are incorporating online learning into their curriculum, researchers state, "it is not enough to design instruction and assume that learning will occur" (Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008, p. 91).

All of the rural distance learners identified the CCHE support center as a critical support service for resources such as high speed computer access, mentors, testing services, and a physical connection to a campus community. As a non-profit distance learning center, CCHE is a unique model that demonstrates the value of providing support services in rural communities. According to Patel and Patel's (2006) research,

online students benefit from distance learning models that integrate visual or face to face support services, and that it would be beneficial to "create offline learning centers . . . to address the needs of students enrolled in distance learning programs" (p. 45).

A third recommendation is for learning institutions to include a quiz that must be passed before students can register for courses or access their online class. The quiz should include how to navigate the course web page, find support resources, and submit assignments – in short, everything that the student needs to know to participate in an online learning environment. Most of the rural distance learners in this study expressed frustration navigating the course web page and finding online support services. The students felt overwhelmed by the online course web sites and often blamed their age and lack of familiarity with using computers. Bruckman (2004) suggests that "designers begin with learner needs and choose technologies to meet those needs" (p. x).

Recent research has revealed that current online aptitude survey instruments are ineffective for predicting student success in the online learning environment (Austin, 2010; Hall, 2009). Measuring skills is critical because research has demonstrated that "students who lack technical skills related not only to basic computer skills, but also writing and typing skills may become frustrated and drop from the program" (Brooks, 2003, p. 2).

Recommendations for Further Research

This research project explored rural distance learners' motivation and persistence in a community with an established support center. There is need for additional research exploring support resources utilized by other rural distance learners, and distance learners in general. There is also financial incentive for higher education institutions to explore

how best to provide support services to online learners. According to the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) (Twigg, 2005), re-designing introductory courses so they enhance student access could reduce an institution's cost per student by 38% to as much as 43%. With the rapid growth of online enrollment it is imperative that solutions are found and implemented to improve retention rates across the nation so learning institutions can meet the growing need for an educated workforce.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

You are invited to be in a research study about what motivates and supports distance learning students. This study is a component of Paula Sundet Wolf's research as a PhD candidate at the University of North Dakota.

The purpose of this research study is to identify specific motivators for distance learning students. Our premise is that Cook County Higher Education (CCHE) is providing key support tools not being provided in other locations. We hope that by identifying these specific motivators, other rural communities can establish distance learning centers, and higher education learning institutions can implement changes that will improve distance learning programs across the nation.

PARTICIPANTS

Approximately 30 people will take part in this study at the CCHE site.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation in the study will last one month. You will need to visit the CCHE location three times. The first visit will take up to one hour, the next visit 15 to 30 minutes, and the final visit up to 15 minutes.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?

If you are one of the focus group participants, you will fill out a survey form and answer a short essay question prior to the first meeting. You are free to skip any question you prefer not to answer. At the first meeting, you will turn in the survey form and participate in the focus group made up of fellow students. During the one-hour focus group session, you will respond to questions, and you may discuss the topic and exchange information as you feel comfortable responding. There are eleven primary questions, but other questions may develop from the group's responses. As with the survey, you are free to skip any question you prefer not to answer. At the completion of the focus group, I will compile the results, and will meet with you as a group to ask if I have fairly represented your responses. If there are needed changes, I will make those adjustments, and meet with you one more times to assure that your responses have been accurately expressed without revealing your identity.

If you are one of the individual interview participants, you will fill out a survey form and answer a short essay question prior to the first meeting. You are free to skip any question you prefer not to answer. At the first meeting, you will turn in the survey form. At the one-hour interview session, you will respond to interview questions, and you may discuss the questions and exchange information as you feel comfortable responding. There are eleven primary questions, but other questions may develop from your responses. As with the survey, you are free

Date_____
Subject Initials: _____

to skip any question you prefer not to answer. At the completion of the interview, I will compile the results, and will meet with you to ask if I have fairly represented your responses. If there are needed changes, I will make those adjustments, and meet you one more time to assure that your responses have been accurately expressed without revealing your identity.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?

There are no foreseeable risks in participating in this study. Every effort will be made to assure your anonymity.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, I hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because you will be providing valuable information that may help improve distance learning degree programs, and help future distance learning students succeed in their course of study.

WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

You will not be paid for being in this research study. However, you will receive a $10 gift certificate to a local coffee shop.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of using numbers to identify participants within the study, and pseudonyms when the research report is written. The research data will be kept in a secure location in my home; I will be the only one with access to the information. After three years, the data will be destroyed entirely.

If I write a report or article about this study, I will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified. It is possible that the data gathering process will be reviewed by an outside auditor to validate the quality of this study, and while it is possible he or she will review some of the data, there will be no access to data that could reveal your identify.

As a participant, you have the right to review or edit your recorded contribution. The recording will be destroyed three years after the conclusion of this research project.

Date_____
Subject Initials: _____

IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with CCHE or the University of North Dakota.

If you decide to leave the study early, we ask that you contact the researcher (Paula Sundet Wolf), and, if possible, make arrangements for a close-out visit. There are no consequences if you wish to withdraw from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?

The researcher conducting this study is Paula Sundet Wolf. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Paula Sundet Wolf at (218) 387-3411 during the day and at (218) 663-7854 after hours. You may also contact Dr. Lynne Chalmers, University of North Dakota (UND), at (701) 777-3187. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279.

Dr. Chalmers is overseeing the research project as part of Sundet Wolf's PhD dissertation at UND. You can also contact one of CCHE's board members: Janet Ditmanson (387-2277) or Bob Pratt (387-2459).

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name: _____

_____ _____

Signature of study participant Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject

_____ _____

Paula Sundet Wolf Date

University of North Dakota
Institutional Review Board
Approved on NOV 9 2011
Expires on NOV 8 2012

Date_____
Subject Initials: _____

APPENDIX B

Demographic Questions

Gender ___ Male ___ Female ___ **Age** **Employment Status** ___ Unemployed ___ Part-time ___ Full-time	**College Experience *Prior* to Distance Learning Program** _____ None _____ Some college _____ Degree **What was your *distance* degree program? _____** **Was this a career change for you?** _____ Yes _____ No **Describe your degree program:** _____ Entirely on-line (or some other form of technology) _____ Some on-campus time _____ Some local face-to-face class time

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Questions

Questions adapted from Charmaz (2010, pp. 30-31).

Initial Open-Ended Questions:
Tell me about why you went back to school.

What do you see as the challenges associated with going back to school?

What surprised you about going back to school?

Describe what you like about being in school.

What do you dislike about being in school?

Describe your interaction with your instructors.

Describe your interaction with your fellow distance students.

How would you describe your relationship with your school?

How would you describe your relationship with Cook County Higher Education?

What motivates you to keep going with your school work?

Describe the technology you need to use for your school work.

Intermediate Interview Questions:
What were your expectations about going back to school?

What were your other choices?

Tell me about your thoughts and feelings about being in school.

What do your friends and family think of you being in school?

What do you see as your strengths?

What do you see as your weaknesses?

Could you describe a typical day as you are in school?

How do you feel about your online discussion groups?

Are there instructors that stand out in your mind, and if so, why?

How long does it take to get your papers graded?

Describe how you tackle your school work.

Who and what do you go to for help with your school work?

Who and what has been the most helpful, and why?

Closing Questions:
What will change for you when you have your degree?

What is the economic benefit for you to be in school?

What are the economic hardship(s) from being in school?

If you could offer advice to someone else just starting out, what would you suggest?

Is there anything you think I should know more about to understand you better?

What would you like to ask me?

APPENDIX D

Individual Interview Questions

Questions adapted from Charmaz (2010, pp. 30-31).

Initial Open-Ended Interview Questions:
Tell me about why you went back to school.

What did you see as the challenges associated with going back to school?

What surprised you about going back to school?

Describe what you liked about being in school.

What did you dislike about being in school?

Describe what your interaction was like with your instructors.

Describe what your interaction was like with your fellow distance students.

How would you describe your relationship with your school when you were in school?

Now?

How would you describe your relationship with Cook County Higher Education while you were in school? Now?

What motivated you to keep going with your school work?

Describe the technology you needed to use for your school work.

Intermediate Interview Questions:
What were your expectations about going back to school?

What were your other choices?

Tell me about your thoughts and feelings about your school experience.

What did your friends and family think of you being in school?

What did you see as your strengths? How did they grow?

What did you see as your weaknesses? How did you deal with them?

Could you describe a typical day when you were in school?

How did you feel about your online discussion groups?

Are there instructors that stand out in your mind, and if so, why?

How long did it take to get your papers graded?

Describe how you tackled your school work.

Who and what did you go to for help with your school work?

Who and what was been the most helpful, and why?

Closing Questions:
What has changed for you now that you have your degree?

What was the economic benefit for you to be in school?

What were or are the economic hardship(s) from being in school?

If you could offer advice to someone else just starting out, what would you suggest?

Is there anything you think I should know more about to understand you better?

What would you like to ask me?

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