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Exploring Online Community College Course Completion and a Sense of School Community

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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Kathleen Stone

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Abstract

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MS, Buffalo State College, 2008

BS, Plattsburgh State University, 2005

Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Researchers have found low online course completion rates to be a complex problem in higher education. Meanwhile, theory on adult learners' online persistence highlights the importance of a sense of school community. At the small, rural focus community college (FCC) for this study, general education online course completion rates are lower than the national average. FCC has not addressed the low online course completion rates. Using Rovai's composite persistence model as the conceptual framework, this instrumental case study examined how students' experiences and perceptions of a sense of school community contribute to their ability to complete online general education courses. Semistructured interview data were gathered with a purposeful, criterion-based, sample of 9 adult online students taking online general education courses. The inductive data analysis utilized case and cross-case analysis, marking, cutting, and sorting of text until 4 themes emerged: interaction, sense of belonging, support, and educational values. The results led to a white paper recommending an orientation and community space, asynchronous video technology, and an online curriculum instructional designer. This study contributes to positive social change by providing FCC with program and policy change recommendations that support the college's goals of increasing access and success. Increased educational access and success for the local adult population creates informed citizens, contributes to economic growth, and provides a higher quality of life for the community.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my family. James, Austin, and Colette, I am well aware of the sacrifices you have endured as I completed this process. I am forever grateful for your love and support. To my parents, Clarence and Sheila, thank you for always believing in me and showing me what determination looks like. To Stephanie, for always being there when I needed you.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

From 2002 to 2012, the number of students taking at least one online course steadily increased, from 1.6 million to 7.1 million (Allen & Seamen, 2014). Community colleges have been supporting the bulk of the increase of online students. In 2008, over half of the students taking an online course were adult students at a 2-year public institution (Radford, 2011). The growth of adult online learning at community colleges has not been problem free. Online course completion rates have been problematically low (WICHE, 2013). The focus community college in this doctoral project, which I refer to as FCC, is no exception to the problem of low online course completion. FCC has not explored online course completion rates for adult learners.

Factors that contribute to an adult student's ability to complete online courses are complex and the context is crucial to understanding the problem (Gaytan, 2015). Not all factors that can contribute to course completion are within the control of an institution. I used the composite persistence model for adult student persistence in online courses developed by Rovai (2003) as the conceptual framework to examine the problem. Framed within online course completion, persistence is the ability to complete an online course despite obstacles or adverse circumstances (Hart, 2012).

The literature review section provides a picture of the current research that shows online course completion rates are indeed problematic. The research reviewed focused on comparing rates between online and face-to-face courses and examining factors that contribute to course completion and possible solutions. However, there is a lack of

research on community building outside the online classroom, which is important for social integration and institutional commitment, two key factors of persistence identified by Rovai (2003). I explored the online course completion problem at FCC and investigated how a sense of school community may factor into this problem.

Definition of the Problem

The problem I addressed in this study is the low course completion rates in online general education courses at FCC, a small community college. According to V. Sloan, over the last 5 semesters the course completion rate in online courses has been problematic (personal communication, March 26, 2013). FCC took part in a 12 institution statewide data collection of completion rates (V. Sloan, personal communication, March 26, 2013) that showed an average 67% completion rate in 2010 (Fetzner, 2013). V. Sloan also stated that many of the online courses with the lowest completion rates are general education courses, which are foundational to most degree programs. FCC has not had the opportunity to investigate the cause of low completion rates in online courses, even though the successful completion of general education courses is required to complete most degree programs at FCC.

FCC is a small community college in the northeastern United States that enrolls approximately 2,300 part-time and full-time students. FCC offers certificates and associate degrees, with over 40 courses and three degree programs offered online. It is one of 64 colleges in a large state system. FCC is unique in that it serves a small, predominately rural, geographically large, and isolated county. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2013a), the population of the county was 82,128 and geographically

distributed at 79 people per square mile in 2010. The largest and only city in the county has a population of just 19,989 and a poverty rate of 23.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b). Much of the county's population is in rural areas. The area is also unique in that there is the Canadian border to the north, a vast lake to the east, and a large mountain range in the south and west, which isolates the county from other communities.

Small, rural community colleges are less likely to have funding for distance education programs, even though the rural setting and economic hardships hinders the adult students' abilities to attend on campus classes (Howley, Chavis, & Kester, 2013). Distance learning is an important option for those who have difficulty coming to campus. FCC is fortunate to have some resources to offer online courses and programs to meet the needs of adult students in the county.

An online learning coordinator supports the online learning program by coordinating training, creating the semester course shells, compiling the semester offerings, and advising students; however, the coordinator is a faculty member who must split his or her time between teaching and coordinating. Open SUNY, formally the SUNY Learning Network, the state's online learning system, provides help desk support and some initial baseline faculty training. Full-time faculty members develop and teach the online courses. Prior to developing a course, faculty must complete a series of workshops on how to develop and facilitate an online course. Faculty training uses the community of inquiry (COI) framework as a model for effective course design. The COI framework covers topics such as how to create teaching, social, and cognitive presence in the online course, thus building a sense of community.

While some system wide resources exist, such as the help desk support and initial faculty training, FCC has limited campus resources. State funding and enrollment have declined in recent years. The college has made some institutional efforts to aid the online program by providing tutoring for online learners, but research into possible solutions to the low completion rate has not been possible due to the lack of resources. In 2011, the college updated their strategic goals, with a focus on increasing student access, retention, and success. Students successfully completing online courses will contribute to the overall strategic goals. This study will help fill the gap in practice of examining possible factors that could contribute to successful online course completion in a small, isolated, rural environment.

The problem of online course completion experienced by FCC is also apparent in the larger educational environment. The number of students completing at least one online course as part of their degree program has significantly increased (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In fall 2002, 9.6% of enrollments were in online classes and by fall 2012, that number grew to 33.5% (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Students enroll in online learning more often at 2-year public colleges than other types of institutions (Radford, 2011). However, college administrators believe a significant barrier to online learning is the low retention rates, which have plagued the industry (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Considering the substantial growth in online learning at community colleges, combined with the concerns related to keeping students, it is important to look at what keeps students in online courses at community colleges.

Patterson and McFadden (2009) found that older online students were more likely to drop out than younger on-campus students were. Online courses provide a flexible alternative for those with busy lives, especially adult students. In order for adult online students to succeed, it is critical to understand the factors that contribute to online course completion. The increase of enrollment in online courses combined with the high attrition rates warrants more research and attention on course completion.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

FCC has been collecting data on online course completion for a statewide effort to compile completion rates in online community college courses (V. Sloan, personal communication, March 26, 2013). V. Sloan stated that the completion rates are in the 60-70% range (personal communication, March 26, 2013). One community college that took part in the statewide data collection effort reported in a published article that the combined completion rate for 12 community colleges in the state was 67% (Fetzner, 2013). A 67% statewide average is lower than the national average found by WICHE (2013) in a survey of 225 institutions across the United States and Puerto Rico, which found that the average completion rate in online courses was 78%. The rate for 2-year colleges only was slightly lower at 73% (WICHE, 2013). As WICHE found out, it is difficult to find specific data on course completion rates for online courses. Of those surveyed, 55% did not know their online course completion rate (WICHE, 2013). Currently, the federal reporting requirements for institutions does not include course completion rates, which may explain why so many institutions do not maintain that data.

Nationally, the percentage of administrators that believe retention is harder in online courses than face-to-face courses has grown from 24% in 2004 to 41% in 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The number is higher for public schools, at 46%, as well as those that offer online courses, at 42% (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Public schools like FCC are becoming more aware that with online courses comes a need to examine completion. The course completion rates and the perceptions of administrators show that there is a problem with online course completion. At FCC, the completion problem is not only evident; but, there is a lack of resources to address it.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

Research in the area of online course completion also shows that completion rates are a problem for online courses. Researchers of online course completion have primarily focused on comparing online and face-to-face courses, looking for factors that contribute to persistence, or evaluating interventions. Online courses consistently have lower completion rates than face-to-face courses (Jaggars, 2013). Zavarella and Ignash (2009) found a 19-percentage point difference between completion rates in online and face-to-face sections of the same course, with the online section having a 39% withdrawal rate.

The rates have been low enough to cause researchers to investigate the factors that contribute to the problem. Willging and Johnson (2009) surveyed students to look for factors that contributed to the dropout rate of 33.7%. Jones (2013) explored the difference making an orientation course mandatory would have on the 71.8% course completion rate. Hachey, Wladis, and Conway (2015) explored the impact of prior online courses

experience and G.P.A. on completion. Course completion rates are an issue that extends beyond FCC with no one answer to resolving such a complex issue.

Completion rates in online community college courses are a problem for many institutions, including FCC. Online courses have unique differences and needs from campus-based courses and understanding the factors that contribute to course completion are important for developing strategies that will help students persist (Comer, Lenaghan, & Sengupta, 2015; Stanford-Bowers, 2008). One factor, a sense of community in the online classroom, has been heavily researched using the COI Framework (Childress & Spurgin, 2009; Meyer, 2012; Njiro, 2015; Szeto, 2015). However, less attention and research has been given to the culture and climate that makes up a school community in the online environment (Childress & Spurgin, 2009; Rovai, Wighting, & Liu, 2005). School community is an important aspect of institutional commitment and social integration, which are known to be important for successful completion (Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1975).

FCC does not provide any support, programs for online learners, or training for faculty or staff on how to build school community for online adult students. The purpose of this research study was to understand how students' experiences and perceptions of a sense of school community contribute to their ability to complete online general education courses at a small, rural community college. This project study provided a picture of the experiences and factors related to school community in the online environment that the participants of the study believe contribute to successful course completion at FCC.

Definitions

Adult learner: An adult learner has responsibilities and commitments that traditional-aged students typically do not have, such as full or part-time employment, family responsibilities that can include childcare or elder care, responsibility for their own housing, and financial independence. Often adults are defined as 24 and older, but adult responsibilities do not have an age limit. The only age pertinent to the definition of being an adult is 18 and over, as that is the legal age of adulthood (Hansman & Mott, 2010).

Attrition: As the opposite of persistence, attrition is the withdrawal from online courses (Hart, 2012).

Course completion: Definitions of course completion vary from institution to institution. FCC defines online course completion as successfully completing a course with a grade of A, B, or C. (V. Duley, personal communication, April 29, 2014).

Dropout: Dropout refers to the withdrawal from an online course. It is a synonym of attrition (Hart, 2012).

General education courses: General education courses are foundational and common to all degree programs. In the SUNY system, courses designated as general education fall into one of the following areas: basic communication, mathematics, American history, other world civilizations, foreign language, social sciences, humanities, the arts, natural sciences, and western civilization (SUNY, 2015).

Online course: A course delivered via the internet with no required face-to-face meetings (Ashby, Sadera, & McNary, 2011).

Persistence: Persistence is the ability to complete an online course despite obstacles or adverse circumstances (Hart, 2012).

Significance

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), 13% of the 1,990 students at FCC enrolled in an online education course or enrolled only in online education. With 258 students taking online courses, understanding course completion factors is essential. The state system has acknowledged the need for more resources and a focus on completion in online learning, as demonstrated by a new system-wide online learning initiative that has transformed the SUNY Learning Network into a new venture called Open SUNY. In NY, 6.9 million adults do not have a college degree (Open SUNY, 2013).

The focus of Open SUNY is to provide easy transfer and access opportunities for students and offer faculty support in course design and online teaching. Open SUNY will expand what the state has been offering colleges in regards to faculty training and course design assistance. However, it is unclear what will truly be available to small programs such as FCC and at what financial cost. Open SUNY will not address the specific needs at FCC based on the unique setting and culture at the institution, but offer a one size fit all service.

If FCC does not solve the problem, students will continue to drop out of online courses. Potential students may not enroll in online courses based on the experiences of others that have not been successful. Without understanding why students are not successful, it is difficult to address the course completion problem. The county

demographic projections show a population growth in the 25 and over age group and a decline in the 24 and under age group (Cornell University, 2011).

As the demographics change, providing access to adult students will become more crucial for the institution and community. Adult students enroll in online courses at a greater rate than younger students do (Radford, 2011). In 2007-2008, 78% of students enrolled in distance education degree programs were 24 and older (Radford, 2011). During that same period, 55.8% of students enrolled in an online education course were 24 and older (Radford, 2011). The high attrition rate in online courses reduces the ability of the college to maintain economic stability and meet the needs of the adult learners in the community.

Community colleges in general serve an important role in educating the population and producing citizens that can positively contribute to society (Boggs, 2011; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). The open access nature of community colleges creates a welcoming and accessible means for adults to return to college to complete a degree, begin one they were unable to start earlier in life, or study for a career change. Adult students often work full-time, have families, and have other responsibilities that make attending traditional classes difficult (Rovai, 2003). Online courses further open the access to adults who live busy lives and may not be able to attend campus classes.

However, if students are unable to successfully complete online courses, then the access and opportunities that a community college education can provide will not matter. Further, the online environment can feel isolating at a time when connecting to others can help overcome some of the challenges of being an adult online student (Rovai, 2003).

Investigating the problem of online course completion from the lens of school community is important.

Guiding/Research Question

The problem of low course completion rates for online courses is well documented (Fetzner, 2013; Jaggars, 2013; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; WICHE, 2013). Research has focused on comparing outcomes of face-to-face courses with online courses, exploring factors related to course completion, or examining the results of specific interventions used to address the problem (Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012; Jones, 2013; Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). However, there remains a gap in research and practice concerning the role that a sense of school community plays with online community college students. Having a close sense of a school community is often a hallmark of attending community college, where classes are small and faculty attention is on student-centered teaching, rather than research.

I explored the problem of online course completion rates and sought out perceptions and experiences surrounding the role of a sense of school community. Creswell (2012) recommended using subquestions with each central question to narrow the focus. The research questions included one central and two subquestions as follows:

How do online students at FCC describe a sense of school community when completing online courses?

1. In what ways do online students perceive a sense of school community as being present at FCC?

2.   What aspects of a sense of school community do students at FCC perceive

as contributing to successful completion of online courses?

Review of the Literature

I conducted the literature review using the Walden Library, Google Scholar, and

the library available through my workplace. Databases used included, Education

Research Complete, ERIC, Thoreau, Sage Online, Proquest Central, Academic Research

Complete, and Science Direct. Additionally, I searched open access journals using the

Directory of Open Access Journals. Saturation was achieved by using combinations of

the following search terms: *persistence*, *course completion*, *dropout*, *attrition*,

withdrawal, models, theories, adult learners, community college, *online courses*, *online*

education, *online learning*, *distance education*, *distance learning*, and *general education*.

I omitted studies that focused on hybrid or blended online courses or overall college

retention.

Conceptual Framework

I drew from Rovai's (2003) model of student persistence in online distance

education programs, called the composite persistence model (CPM). Rovai recognized

that the number of adult students in higher education was growing while their persistence

remained lower than that of traditional students. Defining who the adult student is can be

challenging. Rovai described the difference in adult students and traditional aged students

as fitting two of three key factors: adult students are often 24 and older, part-time

students, and work full-time. Other researchers have also defined adult learners using

age, enrollment status, and work status, as well as living arrangements, marriage status,

and children (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Jacoby & Garland, 2004). Adult learners often live

off-campus and have work and family obligations that traditional students do not have

(Bean & Metzner, 1985; Jacoby & Garland, 2004). Understanding that adults have

limited time for educational endeavors is a key aspect to understanding the persistence of

adult learners (Rovai, 2003). Time influences every aspect of the adult learner's

educational journey.

Rovai (2003) developed the CPM for online distance education programs by

researching Tinto's (1975) traditional student retention theory and Bean and Metzner's

(1985) model of nontraditional student attrition, combining these two theories with

research on distance learning for adult students. The CPM consists of two distinct times

in an adult online student's life: prior to admission and after admission. Prior to

admission, the CPM includes student characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and

academic preparation, as well as student skills, such as computer and information

literacy, time management, reading, and writing skills, that students bring with them into

college which impact their persistence.

After admissions, external and internal factors related to persistence exist.

External factors include those adult responsibilities that make the adult population of

students unique from traditional aged students, including finances, hours of employment,

and family responsibilities. Rovai drew from Tinto (1975), Bean and Metzner (1985), and

Workman and Stenard (1996) for the many internal factors that can contribute to

persistence and my study drew from the internal factors that contribute to a sense of

community.

Internal factors. Rovai's (2003) CPM includes four key aspects of Tinto's (1975) student integration model as internal factors: academic integration, goal commitment, social integration, and institutional commitment. According to Tinto, the ability to integrate with the academic and social aspects of higher education is connected to their persistence. Institutional and goal commitment is directly related to an individual's integration in the college system (Tinto, 1975). Rovai included these key aspects in his model, along with the importance of learning communities. Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of nontraditional student attrition focused on adult learners, although not in distance learning environments. The internal aspects in the CPM from Bean and Metzner are the factors of study habits, advising, absenteeism, course availability, program fit, current GPA, utility, stress, satisfaction, and commitment.

Rovai (2003) then added research from Workman and Stenard (1996) on adult learners in a distance-learning environment to round out the model. Workman and Stenard described students' needs specific to the distance-learning environment that included clarity of the program, self-esteem, identification with the school, interpersonal relationships, and accessibility to services. Identification with the school is connected to institutional commitment and sense of community (Rovai, 2003; Rovai, Wighting, & Lucking, 2004). Interpersonal relationships are connected to social integration and a sense of community (Rovai, 2003; Rovai et al., 2004). A sense of community is seen through several internal aspects of the CPM: interpersonal relationships, social integration, identification with school, institutional commitment, and learning communities. According to Rovai and Wighting (2005), a sense of community is

important for persistence. This study explored the impact of a sense of community found in these aspects of Rovai's CPM by narrowing the concept further to focus on a sense of school community.

School community. Rovai et al. (2004) further discussed and refined the importance of a sense of community in an online environment for adult students' persistence to include two distinct aspects: classroom community and school community. A sense of community in the online classroom has been the focus of much research in distance learning (Childress & Spurgin, 2009; Rovai et al., 2004). However, school community, which encompasses interpersonal relationships, identification with school, school climate, learning communities, and a sense of belonging, has received much less attention in the distance learning environment (Rovai et al., 2004). Students feeling they are part of a larger community and supported by the institution and others going through the experience is important for successful completion of online courses and programs (Rovai et al., 2004).

Rovai et al. developed a classroom and school community inventory to assess the different types of community in the online environment, finding a discernible difference between classroom and school community. They described school community as having two dimensions: social community and learning community. A school's social community involves "spirit, cohesion, trust, safety, trade, interdependence, and a sense of belonging" (Rovai et al., 2004, p. 267). In turn, a schools learning community "consists of the feelings of learning community members regarding the degree to which they share

group norms and values and the extent to which their educational goals and expectations are satisfied by group membership" (Rovai et al., 2004, p. 267).

Rovai, Wighting, and Liu (2005) compared the sense of classroom and school communities between online and on campus programs and found that online students had a lower sense of school social community. A lower sense of belonging or connectedness can lead to a higher dropout rate (Rovai et al., 2005). Given the importance of a sense of school community within the internal factors of Rovai's adult student online persistence model, my study used Rovai's model, focusing on school community as a lens to examine course completion in the online environment.

Justification of the framework. The focus on Rovai's model for course completion in online courses was important for this research study for several reasons. Traditional retention theories, such as Tinto's student integration model, focused on traditional aged students in campus-based programs. Tinto's model alone is not effective with adult students, community college students, or online environments (Meyer, 2012). Bean and Metzner's (1985) model focused on adult and part-time students, but did not focus on the online environment (Meyer, 2012). Adult students often have numerous external factors that can affect their ability to persist in the online environment; however, institutions have little control over these issues. In contrast, internal factors identified by Rovai (2003) are aspects on which institutions can have an impact.

Other frameworks explore online communities and retention, but they focus on classroom community only. The most studied framework is the community of inquiry (COI) framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Meyer, 2012; Whiteside, 2015).

In the COI framework, three presences are considered crucial for building a successful community of learners in an online environment: cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence (Wisneski, Ozogul, & Bichelmeyer, 2015; Yu & Richardson, 2015). In recent years, the research on COI has expanded into metacognition and learner presence constructs (Garrison & Akyol, 2015; Shea et al., 2014). While faculty can have a direct impact on aspects of online learning included in the COI framework, it only focuses on the classroom environment.

More recently, Lehman and Conceicao (2014) developed a persistence model for online student retention, but as with the COI framework, the focus is on the online classroom environment. Lehman and Conceicao described strategies for instructors to use to increase motivation and retention. There is not a focus with either framework on the wider impact that school community has on successful online course completion.

Building a sense of community in the classroom has been the focus of faculty development at FCC through the COI framework for online learning. However, a focus on school community is not present at the institution or within Open SUNY. FCC students primarily take online general education courses, course by course, not necessarily as part of a cohesive program.

Every time students and faculty enter a course, there is a need to rebuild community (Childress & Spurgin, 2009). Building a connection to the institution, faculty, and staff outside the classroom can support students' sense of community beyond the individual course (Childress & Spurgin, 2009; Rovai et al., 2004). Looking at community more widely provided a deeper view of persistence that was not available. With a process

in place already to support building a sense of community in the classroom, attention on school community was a missing and critical piece. Therefore, using Rovai's (2003) model, which specifically targets adult student persistence and the factor of school community in the online learning environment, as the lens to examine course completion problems at FCC was ideal for contributing to positive change in the online community college setting.

Current Research Literature Review

With the fact that enrollment in online learning nationwide has grown rapidly, attention has focused on the realization that low online course completion rates are a problem (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Some online course completion research involves comparing the completion rates of an online course with the equivalent face-to-face course (Ashby, Sandera, & McNary, 2011; Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012; Xu & Jaggars, 2011; Xu & Jaggars, 2013; Zavarella & Ignash, 2009). Other researchers focused on comparing interventions used to combat the problem or to search for factors that can inform solutions (Fetzner, 2013; Jones, 2013; Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009; Nolan, 2013). What they have in common is the acknowledgment that course completion is a problem in online higher education.

Modality comparison studies. Researchers comparing different modalities for course delivery found that online courses have lower course completion rates than face-to-face courses. Ashby et al. (2011), Zavarella and Ignash (2009), and Xu and Jaggars (2011) compared different modalities of general education courses that specifically included math and/or English. Ashby et al. focused on using quantitative methods to

compare an intermediate algebra course conducted online, blended, and face-to-face at a mid-Atlantic community college. Of the 167 students who enrolled in the course, 63 were in the online sections, and 48 of those students or 76% completed the course (Ashby et al., 2011). In comparison, the face-to-face course had 58 students enroll and 54 complete, for a 93% completion rate (Ashby et al., 2011). The difference is 16-percentage points in completion rates between the face-to-face and online version of the course.

Similarly, Zavarella and Ignash (2009) researched completion and withdrawal rates in online, face-to-face, and hybrid math courses, in a community college setting, finding that 39% of the online students dropped out, for a 61% completion rate. The face-to-face version of the course had an 80% completion rate (Zavarella & Ignash, 2009). In a large study of the Virginia community college system general education math and English courses, Xu and Jaggars (2011) found that math attrition was 19%, and English was 25%. Xu and Jaggars referred to these general education courses as gatekeeper courses because students must pass them to continue on to degree completion.

Students also take science, math, and technology courses, known as STEM courses, for general education credit. Wladis, Hachey, and Conway (2014) explored online STEM course completion rates at a large urban community college by comparing the online with face-to-face versions, and comparing those taken as an elective versus those as part of a major. STEM courses taken as an elective had a better face-to-face completion rate (74.3%) than those taken for a major (66.6%), but in the online environment the opposite was found (Wladis et al., 2014). Online STEM courses taken for elective credit had a 53.7% completion rate and major courses had a 60.3%

completion rate (Wladis et al., 2014). The general pattern that online completion rates were lower can be seen, but the results also show that motivation for why a student is taking an online course is important.

Wolff, Wood-Kustanowitz, and Ashkenazi (2014) also looked at modality of community college science courses, along with 10 other factors. An environmental biology course was used to compare successful completion online versus face-to-face. Successful completion was completing the course and passing the final exam. Withdrawing or failing the final was considered not successful completion. Wolff et al., (2014) found that 60.7% of the online students had a negative outcome compared to only 34.7% of the face-to-face students. The other significant factor for online students was the number of hours they worked (Wolff et al., 2014). Those who worked more than 12 hours a week had a 60% negative outcome rate compare to 25% for those who worked less than 12 hours. The significant difference in outcomes based on work hours has implications for adult learners who often work full-time while taking online courses.

Using a wider range of course disciplines, Hachey et al. (2012) and Xu and Jaggars (2013) researched the difference between community college completion rates by different modalities. Exploring the patterns of attrition between online and face-to-face courses at a large urban, community college revealed that attrition rates were 5-10 points higher for the online courses, which ranged from 19.9 to 23.9% (Hachey et al., 2012). These rates were across all disciplines. Attrition is referring to the percentage of students who drop out of the course, rather than looking at how many completed. The difference between attrition and persistence is an important distinction in order to understand the

numbers. A 23.9% attrition rate is equivalent to 76.1% completing the course, regardless of the grade received.

Using a quantitative instrumental variable technique, Xu and Jaggars researched course completion rates between online and face-to-face courses at 34 two-year or technical colleges in Washington State. Archival data collected showed that online students had a decrease in their chances of persisting by 7-percentage points from campus-based students (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Xu and Jaggars attempted to account for unobserved confounding variables by using an instrumental variable approach, concluding it is likely that descriptive comparisons underestimate the difference between online and face-to-face courses.

In similar studies at university settings, researchers have also found the same results of online courses having lower completion rates than face-to-face versions. Atchley, Wingenbach, and Akers (2013) researched the difference in completion between online and face-to-face courses at a small public university. While smaller than some of the other studies, there was a statistically significant difference at the .05 level between online and face-to-face course completion rates, with online being lower by 2.3-percentage points (Atchley et al., 2013).

Looking at the difference by discipline, they found that online finance and accounting courses had the lowest completion rates. Patterson and McFadden (2009) also used a university setting to compare completion and dropout rates between online and face-to-face versions of two master's degree programs. Results of the quantitative study

showed that student attrition was 6-7 times greater for an online program over the campus-based equivalent.

Ni (2013) examined 152 students taking online and face-to-face public administration courses, finding that the online course had a higher withdrawal and failure rate than the face-to-face version of the course, 10% compared to 4% respectively. Students taking the introductory course were often new to online learning and the subject matter (Ni, 2013). Brown (2012) also compared online and face-to-face courses at the undergraduate and graduate level, finding that online courses in education had a higher withdrawal rate than the face-to-face courses, but found no difference in grades.

Stewart, Mallery, and Choi (2013) not only compared modality, but also included the factor of disability. A sample of 3488 undergraduate and graduate students was included, of which 21.9% of the students withdrew or received a failing grade (Stewart et al., 2013). Stewart et al. found that students who took a face-to-face course were more likely to complete the course than those who took the online version at a .05 significance level. The authors hypothesized that students with disabilities would have higher completion rates in online courses than face-to-face courses, but there was no difference by disability status (Stewart et al., 2013). The benefits of online learning for students with or without disabilities are not fully realized if the completion problem is not adequately addressed.

Mensch (2013) looked at the difference between different online course time lengths rather than comparing online and face-to-face courses. Mensch (2013) researched a university course taught online in a 14-week, 5-week, and 3-week format to determine

what difference course length had on grades and course completion. The 14-week course had the highest withdrawal rate of the three versions at 11.3% and a successful completion rate, a grade of C or higher, of 75% (Mensch, 2013). Mensch found that the shorter length courses had a higher number of A and B grades. Further research about course length should continue to determine the full impact of what a compressed course schedule does for busy adult students taking online courses.

Factors and intervention studies. Researchers focused on factors related to course completion or the results of specific interventions used to combat the problem. Prediction of the likelihood that a student will successfully complete an online course is often a focus of studies looking at factors that contribute to persistence. Grade point average (GPA) is one such factor that is often believed to correlate to future success.

In an effort to reduce attrition one community college restricted access to online courses to students who had a G.P.A. of 2.0 or higher (Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2013). Hachey et al. (2013) explored the effectiveness of access restriction by G.P.A. by comparing the course completion rates before and after the restricted access took effect. They did not find an increase in course completion. In fact, during the first year the rate actually increased slightly from 22.7% to 23.7% (Hachey et al., 2013).

In another study, Hachey, Wladis, and Conway (2014) researched if prior online course outcomes would be a better predictor than G.P.A. for course retention at a community college. Hachey et al. (2014) found that successful prior online course experience was a better predictor than G.P.A. alone in course retention. Looking at G.P.A. alone they found course retention rates to range from 62-70%, with those with

higher G.P.A. having slightly higher retention (Hachey et al., 2014). Hachey et al. (2015), furthered the research on prior course experience by specifically looking at STEM courses, finding that prior dropouts and lower grades resulted in poor subsequent performance. In all of these studies, course completion rates were a significant issue for the community colleges involved.

Ice, Gibson, Boston, and Becher (2011) and Liu et al. (2009) reported low completion rates when researching social presence in online courses. Ice et al. (2011) researched factors contributing to course completion, using the COI framework and examining high and low disenrollment quartiles at a large enrollment online institution. In 2007, the dropout rate was 23.7%, and by 2010, enrollment surged to almost 80,000 (Ice et al., 2011). Finding solutions for such a high number of students not completing online courses was crucial. The high quartile of 313 courses averaged a 41.1% dropout rate and the low quartile of 313 courses averaged 17% (Ice et al., 2011).

Liu et al. (2009) completed a similar study researching social presence, course retention, and final grade in a wide range of online community college courses to determine the effect of social presence. Liu et al. defined course retention as completing with a C or greater at the end of the term. Out of 108 participants who completed the survey, 81.5 % successfully completed their online course (Liu et al., 2009). While slightly better than the course completion rate found by Ice et al., it is still a sizeable number of students not persisting.

Tirrell and Quick (2012) looked at course design, which incorporates social presence, by surveying community college faculty to determine if they were using

Chickering's seven principles of good practice in online course design and how those practices related to attrition. Attrition rates that ranged from 10% -50% prompted the investigation (Tirrell & Quick, 2012). Findings showed that there was a correlation between attrition and designing for student engagement (Tirrell & Quick, 2012). Therefore, course completion rates could possibly improve with more interactive course design.

Park and Choi (2009), Willging and Johnson (2009), and Fetzner (2013) all used survey research methodology to research factors that students felt contributed to low completion rates. Park and Choi (2009) researched online course completion, at a Midwestern university, to look for factors that contribute to students dropping out of online courses. Increasing dropout rates drove the study. Dropout rates increased from 46% to 54.2% after changing to a new learning management system (Park & Choi, 2009). With over half of all students not completing the online course, investigating factors that could be contributing to the high dropout rate was critical. Park and Choi surveyed students who completed or dropped out, and found external factors and instructional design were the most common factors of concern.

Willging and Johnson (2009) also found high dropout rates when they looked at the first course in a human resources education program, finding an average dropout rate of 33.7%. Willging and Johnson surveyed students who dropped out using an online questionnaire and there was not one common reason for their attrition. While the response rate was only ten out of 28 students, it does seem that reasons for attrition are varied and complex.

Fetzner (2013) also attempted to contact students who had dropped out of online courses using a survey to investigate factors that contributed to their attrition. The results of the survey indicated students needed support with soft skills, such as time management, organizational skills, and communication. Fetzner used census to completion as a measure of persistence and found that the online course completion rate was 5-10% lower than face-to-face courses. Before the census date, students have a chance to transfer or drop a course without having grade or financial implications.

Course completion rates were also found to be problematic in university settings internationally. Lee, Choi, and Kim (2013) surveyed adult online students in Korea, looking at factors such as time management, self-regulation, academic locus of control, self-efficacy, and family support. Of the 169 students surveyed, 116 completed and 53 withdrew after the add-drop period, for a 31% dropout rate (Lee et al., 2013). Lee et al. (2013) found that the internal factors of academic locus of control and metacongitive self-regulation were the most significant factors of persistence.

Kim and Park (2015) studied attrition factors for adult female learners in Korea. Internal motivation, marital status, support, home and child responsibilities, and time were the top five factors, with internal motivation being the most important factor in dropping out (Kim & Park, 2015). Internal motivation, self-regulation, and locus of control are difficult to address by an institution, and possible cultural difference can affect these factors of persistence.

Rostaminezhad, Mozayani, Norozi, and Iziy (2013), surveyed 223 Iranian undergraduate information technology and engineering students to determine the factors

that contribute to course dropout rates that are as high as 60%. The survey asked students about motivation, self-regulation, and interaction (Rostaminezhad et al., 2013). Results found that students who rated low for self-regulation were also the least persistent (Rostaminezhad et al., 2013).

Another international study in Germany explored the relationship between participation patterns and dropout rates for 209 students in an online course (Nistor & Neubauer, 2010). Nistor and Neubauer (2010) found that 23.9% of the students dropped out of the course, and they did not participate as much as the completers did. While these studies have an international focus, they show that online course completion is a wide spread issue.

Swinburne University of Technology in Australia cited attrition rates of more than 20% for online courses (Greenland & Moore, 2014). The attrition rate was for lower level, first courses in a sequence. As they examined courses at the next levels, attrition went steadily down to 13.3% and then 11.4% (Greenland & Moore, 2014). They theorize that more support should be given to the lower level courses.

Back in the United States at a large urban community college, Wladis, Conway, and Hachey (2014) also looked at the level (upper or lower) and reason (elective, distributional, or major) a student took an online course to determine if either could be used a predictor of course retention and outcomes. Wladis et al. (2014) looked at 122 sections of 21 different courses taught between 2004 and 2010, for a total of 2330 participants. Half of the sections were face-to-face and half online. They found that the online courses had higher attrition, lower level courses had higher attrition than upper

level, and elective courses had higher attrition than major courses. They also recommended extra support for online courses that were lower level and for those that are not a major requirement. In contrast looking at student perceptions of different course levels, Comer, Lenaghan, and Sengupta (2015) found that students had a more favorable view of their learning in introductory online courses than advanced online courses. Students perceived the advanced courses to be more demanding (Comer et al., 2015). However, student perceptions of their learning and their attrition rates may not correlate.

Several researchers compared the course completion rates prior to and after implementing orientation programs for online learners. Ali and Leeds (2009) wanted to know what impact a face-to-face orientation would have on course retention. Prior to the orientation, a business information systems course with four online sections had a 66% course completion rate, with the two sections taught by one of the two researchers averaging a 53% completion rate (Ali & Leeds, 2009). After the orientation program began, the overall completion rate of the sections taught by one of the researchers went up to 57.8%, with those who attended the orientation having a course completion rate of 91% (Ali & Leeds, 2009). The orientation was only helpful if students attended and many did not. Since online students often take online courses because of the flexibility they provide by not requiring face-to-face meetings (Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2009), the results of the orientation on course completion rates is not surprising.

Richland Community College had an optional campus-based orientation program for online learners and revised it to become mandatory and online (Jones, 2013). Before becoming mandatory and online, the course completion rates were 71.8% and after

increased to 79.5% (Jones, 2013). While there is room for improvement, a simple change to the administration of the orientation made a significant difference in course completion rates.

Nichols (2010) and Nolan (2013) looked at course completion rates before and after the implementation of new online student services. Nichols implemented four interventions that include a readiness survey, orientation, frequent messages, and personal contact as indicated as needed by the survey. Prior to the change in services, there was a 71.3% completion rate that increased after the changes to 83.3% (Nichols, 2010). Nolan reported on the results of implementing a new online advising pilot program at the Community College of Vermont. Prior to the pilot course, retention was at 53%, and the pilot of 56 students only increased that rate to 54% (Nolan, 2013). While the results were not conclusive, what is clear from Nolan's study is the successful completion of online courses is a problem for the institution.

Relevance and relationship of selected literature. Whether comparing online and face-to-face courses, the results of interventions, or research into persistence factors, it is clear that online course completion rates are a problem that appears in the research. Low completion rates in online courses is a complex problem, with possible solutions that are dependent on the institution and students that they serve. All of the studies reviewed focused on online course completion. Some specifically focused on online community college courses (Ashby et al., 2011; Fetzner, 2013; Hachey, 2012; Jones, 2013; Liu et al., 2009; Nolan, 2013; Tirrell & Quick, 2012; Xu & Jaggars, 2011; Xu & Jaggars, 2013; Zavarella & Ignash, 2009) and several focused on general education

courses (Ashby et al., 2011; Xu & Jaggars, 2011; Zavarella & Ignash, 2009). These studies are applicable to my research study in several ways.

Ashby et al. (2011) identified a lack of research concerning developmental community college online math courses. Ashby et al. (2011) and Zavarella and Ignash (2009) researched math in community college settings. Xu and Jaggars (2011) focused on math and English at a large Virginia community college system. Math and English are general education courses and all students at FCC must pass a basic college level math and English course. FCC is also part of a large system, much like the Virginia community college system. The population researched by Xu and Jaggars is primarily, rural, low-income and underfunded, which is similar to the demographics in the county FCC serves.

The courses studied by Liu et al. (2009) were very similar to those offered online at FCC: Mathematics, Science, Business, English, History, and Psychology. Aspects of the importance of community were also present in some studies (Ice et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2009). The Fetzner (2013) study is especially relevant since it is a community college in the same state system as FCC. Similarities include both institutions use the same faculty-training program, same course design methodology, and the same learning management system.

Research studies into persistence in online higher education courses show that course completion rates are lower when compared to face-to-face courses. Research into intervention strategies and factors that contribute to persistence also show that the rates could use improvement. FCC is not alone in the problem of low course completion rates in online courses. Given the complexity of the problem, the importance of context, and

the local need for a solution, this research study explored factors that informed a possible

solution to the problem using Rovai's (2003) model of student persistence in online

distance education programs as a lens.

Implications

Directions for the project of this study were based on the outcomes of the data

collection and analysis. I anticipated that students would vary in their understanding of

school community and their perceptions of the possible influence it could have on their

ability to complete courses, but was surprised at some of the commonalities that emerged.

Students who were involved with on campus clubs or activities had a clearer sense of

how a sense of school community may influence their studies. A majority of the students

felt there is room for improving a sense of school community for online students at FCC.

I anticipated they would have ideas about how to nurture a sense of school community

for adult online students that will help improve online course completion, and indeed,

they had some specific thoughts on the issue.

This research led to a project that creates a way for a sense of school community

to be developed outside the course room and within it, helping online students feel

connected to the institution, faculty, and each other. The implications of this doctoral

project are to help FCC increase the online course completion rates for adult students,

ultimately assisting the adult population attain higher education, which supports

economic growth of the community and creates educated, informed citizens.

Summary

FCC is a small, isolated, rural community college that offers approximately 40 courses and three degree programs online. The institution's unique setting and limited resources influence the need for online courses as well as the time and finances available for the effort. Online course completion rates in general education courses are a problem for FCC. FCC has made efforts to provide students with tutoring and to ensure that faculty design courses with best practices for online learning, including how to build communities in the courses. There remains a gap in practice surrounding how else to address the problem.

The research literature reviewed showed that course completion rates are a problem for institutions around the state, nation, and world. Rovai's CPM framework explains the importance of a sense of school community that is currently a gap in practice at FCC and a gap in research in the literature. Therefore, this doctoral study sought to understand how students' experiences and perceptions of a sense of school community contribute to their ability to complete online general education courses at small, rural, isolated community college. The main research question explored how the presence or absence of a sense of school community affects adult student's perceptions of their ability to complete an online course. The next section outlines how using a qualitative case study research methodology allowed for the depth needed to understand the online course completion problem from the perspective of the adult students who registered for online courses as FCC.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand how students' experiences and perceptions of a sense of school community contribute to their ability to complete online general education courses. The research questions included one exploratory guiding research question and two subquestions as follows:

How do online students at FCC describe a sense of school community when completing online courses?

1. In what ways do online students perceive a sense of school community as being present at FCC?

2. What aspects of a sense of school community do students at FCC perceive as contributing to successful completion of online courses?

The research questions are qualitative in nature because they are open-ended and seek out the participant's thoughts and feelings about his or her online learning experience and sense of school community. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), a common error is creating research questions that are too broad. I narrowed the research questions to look at the topic of the sense of school community in relation to online course completion, based on the composite persistence model (CPM). Narrowing to one factor avoids the pitfall of being too broad.

Qualitative research involves the researcher studying in a natural setting in order "to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Rossman and Rallis (2003) described eight

characteristics common to all qualitative research; a focus on the natural world, use of multiple methods, a focus on the context, use of self-reflection, sensitivity to personal biography, emergent in nature, multifaceted and iterative, and interpretive. Qualitative research is also rich in paradigms and possible methodologies. Qualitative research paradigms can include postpositivist, constructivist, critical and feminist, and poststructuralist (Hatch, 2002).

I followed a constructivist paradigm, where the researcher sees the world as having multiple realities and knowledge is constructed through interactions with others (Hatch, 2002). The constructivist paradigm lends itself to naturalistic qualitative methods, including case study research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hatch, 2002). A case study is a bounded system in which there is a limited amount of data available to collect (Merriam, 2009). Yin (2009) further described a case study as an investigation of a contemporary phenomenon in a real life context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear. I used a case study approach due to the qualitative nature of the purpose and research questions, along with my constructivist paradigm and the bounded complex nature of the research setting.

Case studies can be intrinsic, instrumental, or collective (Stake, 2000). In intrinsic case studies, the case itself is more important than the phenomenon being studied (Stake, 2000). A researcher does not complete an intrinsic case study to look into a generic problem, but to look deeply into the case. Instrumental case studies use the case to understand an issue, the phenomenon and the case, the "particular and general" are both of interest (Stake, 2000, p. 437). At the other end of the spectrum is a collective case

study. In a collective case study, the general is more important than the case, so multiple cases will be used to study a specific problem (Stake, 2000).

I used an instrumental case study because the purpose of understanding how students' experiences and perceptions of a sense of school community contribute to their ability to complete online general education courses, was as much of interest as the unique setting in which the case is bounded. In this case study, the institution and the number of students who took online courses create a bounded system. The problem of low course completion rates in online community college courses is complex, and the context is an important piece of the puzzle. Using an instrumental case study approach allowed for insight into the low course completion rate problem within the context of the case.

I also considered other methodologies for this project study, such as quantitative methods, intrinsic case study, phenomenology, and grounded theory. Quantitative studies provide a broad picture of the problem through a deductive approach by testing hypotheses and using numerical data, rather than a constructivist meaning-making approach (Creswell, 2012). Many of the studies completed looking at course completion of online community college courses have used quantitative methods (Ashby et al., 2011; Xu & Jaggars, 2011; Zavarella & Ignash, 2009). By using qualitative methods, I took a more in-depth look into the problem.

For this study, the case was important, but equally important and intertwined with the setting was the problem of online course completion rates through a school community lens; therefore, I did not choose an intrinsic case study. Phenomenology and

grounded theory are both qualitative approaches, but their purpose did not align with the purpose of this study. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of the participants (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), phenomenology usually involves intense emotions. Phenomenology seeks to understand the "essence" of phenomenon and describes the experiences in detail (Moustakas, 1994). An explanation and analysis of the phenomenon is not the focus of phenomenology; the goal is for the descriptions to represent the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). While I did seek to understand a phenomenon, the case was equally important, and the study focused on explanation and analysis. Grounded theory uses a constant comparative approach to data collection and a main category in an attempt to build a theory from the data that emerges (Merriam, 2009). I did not intend to build a theory from this case study, which made grounded theory inappropriate.

Participants

Participant selection was a purposeful, criterion-based sample of students using maximum variation across general education disciplines to make sure that a variety of subject matters was included. According to Creswell (2012), using maximum variation allows a researcher to gain many perspectives on an issue. The criteria for participants included they were adults, 18 or older, and registered in a fully online general education course.

Participants included nine interviewees. On average, 250 students complete an online course at FCC per semester. The number of interviews to complete for a qualitative study is not straightforward. Merriam (2009), Hatch (2002), and Rossman and

Rallis (2003) all discuss finding a balance between depth and breadth needed for a particular study. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) attempted to quantify how many interviews they completed prior to finding data saturation for their study. Examining coding results in groups of six interviews, Guest et al. found that saturation was achieved by the end of 12 interviews. Given this result, along with the recommendations to consider the breadth and depth needed based on the specific case, the goal was to have eight to10 participants, to provide depth and breadth to answer the research questions concerning course completion and school community.

The online learning coordinator provided the access to the students through the learning management system. I created an announcement inviting students to participate, and the online learning coordinator posted the announcement in the learning management system. The announcement included an overview of the study, participant criteria, and informed consent information. The announcement did not produce enough participants one week after being posted; so, I sent a follow-up announcement to the online coordinator to post. The two announcements resulted in enough participants. I chose an announcement as the method of contact since course announcements appear when students enter the learning management system.

Those who chose to participate received an informed consent form and were asked to confirm that they were 18 or over. Participants received a $20 Target e-gift card via e-mail within 10 days of the interview as compensation of their time. At completion of the research, participants received a 1-2 page summary of the results.

Establishing a researcher-participant relationship is one of the most important parts of conducting qualitative interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Knox & Burkard, 2009). I was respectful of the participants and allowed them time to express any questions or concerns they had about the study. Establishing the relationship was initiated with the invitations. The invitations included information such as my background, I am not a current employee of the college, and confidentiality of the study to help them feel safe and secure with speaking with me.

The ethical protection of participants was a priority for this study. To protect participants' confidentiality, I replaced their names with a number (i.e. Participant 1, Participant 2). I instructed participants to contact me directly so the online coordinator or instructors did not know who participated. All participants received an informed consent form prior to participating in the study, describing the background of the study, the voluntary nature of it, any risks or benefits, payments, privacy, and contact information. For this study, no harm was done beyond the typical everyday stresses that someone would encounter. Since participation was confidential, the study did not affect students' course work. I obtained IRB approval through Walden University; FCC does not have an IRB.

Data Collection

Open-ended, semistructured individual interviews of nine students were the data collection method. Open-ended, semistructured interviews balance gaining specific information with the flexibility and spontaneity of exploration (Merriam, 2009). Open-ended responses allow a researcher to peer into the unique world of the participants

without influencing the participants from having rigid categorical questions (Patton, 2002).

According to Fontana and Frey (1994), building rapport with the participants was critical when interviewing, and it was important to think about how one will represent themselves to the participants. I wanted the participants to feel comfortable sharing with me. When teaching remedial math, I connected to the students by explaining that I too, had to take remedial math as an adult student. Knowing that I had a similar experience and succeeded was important for building a trusting and understanding relationship. I shared with participants that I was once an adult student at FCC, who took online classes. I wanted them to know that I understood and that I was truly interested in their experiences and thoughts. I was careful to note that I did not expect their experience to be similar or different from mine, and that the point of the research was to understand their unique perspective. My experience and perspectives were included during the interview introduction.

I used an interview protocol form to guide the process. An interview protocol helps the researcher maintain consistency in a semistructured interview by listing the interview questions and reminding the researcher of the instructions they need to provide to the participants (Creswell, 2012). The protocol included a header, a brief introduction with the purpose of the study, a reminder of the informed consent form, and an overview of how the interview process would work, followed by the questions and probes, and a conclusion thanking the interviewees with next steps (Appendix B). The protocol had seven questions. The first question allowed for rapport building by asking the interviewee

to talk about them self. The last question provided an opportunity for them to share further thoughts that the questions may not have addressed. The other five questions were directly related to the research questions and had two to six probes each. The social and learning community concepts of school community from Rovai et al. (2004) provided a framework for the questions and probes.

Time constraints, family responsibilities, work responsibilities, and geographical constraints can contribute to making face-to-face meetings difficult for adult students. Since the population for this study included adults who have constraints with attending face-to-face classes, having face-to-face interviews could have resulted in the unintentional exclusion of the participants that I sought to learn from in the study. I conducted the interviews by telephone.

Telephone interviews reduce the economic and time barriers of travel for participants, and can reduce some bias participants may have from the interviewer's body language (Knox & Burkard, 2009). While phone interviews reduce the ability for a researcher to have visual cues during the interview, verbal cues provide the researcher with guides for the interview and later data analysis (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). One way to combat the lack of visual cues would be to utilize web video conferencing technology. However, the population studied was not all familiar with video conferencing technology, as the courses they took were asynchronous and did not require the use of such technology.

The researcher-participant relationship is crucial for qualitative studies, and phone interviews are no exception (Knox & Burkard, 2009). As previously described, I worked

to build a trusting and understanding relationship prior to starting the interviews and reminded the participants during the introduction of my background, and that I was truly interested in their unique perspective. Interviewers should pay attention to verbal cues of participants, such as the pacing of the speech, silence, volume, and tone (Fontana & Frey, 1994). I was also careful about my verbal cues, allowing some silence for participants to think and kept my tone and pacing clear and friendly.

Participants who responded to the posted invitation to participate contacted me by email to set up the time. Interviews lasted no longer than 60 minutes and took place during the fall 2014 semester at convenient times for the participants. I digitally recorded the interviews, transcribed them for analysis, and replaced names with participant numbers. I am maintaining the interview recordings in a password protected computer folder and will destroy it at the completion of 5 years. Interview recordings were deleted from the digital recorder once they were successfully transferred to the computer.

I tracked the data collected using a word processor and spreadsheet. The word processor was used to transcribe the data, and the spreadsheet was used for organizing the data as it was analyzed. I am comfortable and competent with both of these tools. These files are also in a password protected computer folder. During the interviews, I noted anything that stood out in my mind and spent a few moments reflecting on my thoughts.

It was important for me to be aware of potential bias that I had. I am not employed by FCC, but worked there in the past as a professional employee and as an adjunct faculty member who taught face-to-face and online. I also attended classes, including online classes, and graduated from FCC as an adult student. I was active in

activities and clubs on campus as both a student and faculty member. I was the president of the science club and the math club advisor. I am aware that my prior experience can introduce bias towards being an adult online student, a faculty member, and a participant in school activities at FCC. Currently, I am director of curriculum and instructional design for online courses at another college in the same state university system and I am very familiar with online learning.

The benefit of not working at FCC is that I have no professional relationship with the students. I was able to be an objective outsider for them to confide in, while still having some understanding of what it was like to be an adult student and employee of FCC. On the other hand, I reminded myself that it is the experience of the participants, and not my experiences as a student, a faculty member, or online course administrator that was important for this study in order to reduce bias in my findings.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis are a simultaneous and inductive process (Creswell, 2012). To prepare and organize, I transcribed each interview and maintained master and working copies of the data. According to Patton (2002), a master copy that is never used should be kept in a safe place. I kept a master electronic copy on a password-protected computer and one on a flash drive in a fireproof lock box. I used working copies for writing notes on, coding, cutting, and pasting. Working paper copies were kept in a locked file when not in use.

I began with a case analysis of each interview transcript and followed with cross-case pattern analysis of the interview protocol questions (Patton, 2002). I read each

transcript more than once, and made comments to begin organizing the data into topics and then codes. According to Ryan and Bernard (2000), "coding is the heart and soul of whole-text analysis" (p. 780). Codes are labels attached to chunks of words, phrases or paragraphs (Basit, 2003). Several coding strategies work well for a novice researcher with narrative analysis to complete (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Looking for repetition of words, cutting and sorting of quotes or expressions, and looking for similarities and differences are the most common and easiest for a new researcher (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). I began to code data using pawing and marking of text, followed by cutting and sorting of quotes or expressions. Through an iterative process, the common codes eventually became themes. Inductive analysis can include indigenous concepts that emerge from the participants or sensitizing concepts that the researcher assigns when participants do not identify a term for the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The school community concept framed the interview questions, and those questions provided a framework for the data analysis. Sensitizing concepts related to the school community framework served as the basis of the analysis.

I completed a review of the data to look for rival explanations and negative cases. Rival explanations included looking for alternate categories that may have led to other conclusions (Patton, 2002; Tobin, 2010). Negative cases are those that did not fit the other patterns (Brodsky, 2008; Patton, 2002). It was important to look and account for those types of cases to ensure accuracy and credibility of the findings (Anney, 2014). A discussion of rival explanations and negative cases occurs in the results of analysis section.

Word processing and spreadsheets aided in the analysis process. I used a hard copy version of the data for the initial reading, notes, and highlighting of quotes from each transcript and transferred the quotes from the word document to a spreadsheet. The highlighting ability of Microsoft Excel allowed quotes to emerge into codes and then themes using different colors. A legend of what each color meant in the spreadsheet avoided confusion.

I demonstrated the accuracy and credibility through several ways. The recording of the interviews aided with the accuracy of the transcription. One method for achieving credibility is through member checking (Merriam, 2009). To ensure that my interpretations of the interviews were correct, I utilized member checking. Member checking gives participants the opportunity to review the researcher's interpretations and provide clarity or additional information (Baxter & Jack, 2008). All participants received a draft of the findings to review for accuracy and eight of the nine responded (Appendix H).

Reflexivity is another method for showing credibility. Reflexivity is reflecting critically about oneself as a researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). I practiced reflexivity during the data collection and analysis phase by keeping a journal (see Appendix I). The journal provided an outlet for reflecting on the process while it was occurring. As an example, reflecting on my interviewing skills after the first interview helped me improve the length of time I waited for the participant to respond to a question. I realized that I needed to allow them more time to think through their answers. Additionally, to show trustworthiness it was important to write with clarity and transparency, showing a sound

methodological approach to the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Utilizing these various techniques helped form a solid research study that is credible, trustworthy, and as accurate as possible.

Results of Analysis

The purpose of this study was to understand how students' experiences and perceptions of a sense of school community contribute to their ability to complete online general education courses. These research questions framed the development of the interview questions used for semistructured interviews with nine adult community college students. All participants consented that they were 18 or over and taking at least one fully online general education course during the fall 2014 semester. The sample represented a wide range of general education disciplines, including basic communication, humanities, social sciences, math, natural sciences, arts, and information management.

Additional demographic information was not specifically asked for as part of this study; however, many participants discussed aspects of their lives during the interviews. Seven of the participants were female, and two were male. Six were taking a full-time course load (over 12-credits), and three were taking a part-time load (under 12-credits). Three identified as working full-time, two part-time, two as stay-at-home moms, and two did not state if they were currently employed. Five directly identified as being a primary caregiver for children or the elderly.

Through an inductive analysis process, hundreds of quotes were summarized and coded using a sense of school community as the lens. The codes eventually emerged into

four main themes: (a) interaction, (b) sense of belonging, (c) support, and (d) educational

values. I used the learning and social community dimensions of school community in the

coding and development of themes. Learning community involves shared norms, values,

the meeting of educational goals and expectations (Rovai et al., 2004). Social community

involves "spirit, cohesion, trust, safety, trade, interdependence, and a sense of belonging"

(Rovai et al., 2004, p. 267).

The first theme of interaction relates to social community. In order to build the

various aspects of social community, such as cohesion, sense of belonging, and

interdependence, interactions were found to be critical. A sense of a belonging emerged

as the next theme, which is directly an aspect of social community. Students did not feel a

sense of belonging and expressed a feeling of disconnection. Support is part of social and

learning community aspects of school community. Students felt a lack of support on a

social community level from the lack of interaction and sense of belonging, and on a

learning community level from their needs not being met academically due to the issues

with clarity of services. Finally, the last theme, educational values, speaks to shared

values within a learning community. The learning community, which includes faculty

and staff, need a shared understanding of students educational values for a sense of

school community to thrive.

Interaction

A significant theme, which emerged from the participants, was surrounding the

interactions that they have with students, faculty, and the college as a whole. Interactions

were limited in quantity, nature, and type. Student-student interaction occurred more

often than student-faculty interaction, and student-school interaction was almost non-existent, based on the experience and perspectives of the students. The options and ease of interactions and ways the interactions made the participants feel were also discussed. Finally, students discussed aspects of interaction that they feel are important for a sense of school community.

Limited interactions. Student-student interaction online was limited to mainly mandatory graded discussions. Many students mentioned that if the discussions were not mandatory, there would be no interaction. Other options available for interacting included email and help forums, but students do not regularly reach out to each other. Some courses had group projects, but they too were limited in their interaction. For example, when describing interactions with students, participants made statements such as:

> In the online classes basically all we do for interaction is we have discussion posts. (Participant 6)

> There might be four people in my group, but only one of them is like talking and working. (Participant 2)

> It has been few and far between that I have actually communicated with classmates in purely online courses outside of the classroom. I mean sometimes I get an oddball email here or there with somebody. I don't find that e-mails of that regard happen very frequently. (Participant 4)

Participant 3 described interactions on the discussion forums as very active because of the small scale of the environment, but none of the other students described their experience in that way.

Student - faculty interaction was limited to feedback on assignments and emails. Feedback is usually small comments but can be more detailed if it is something important. The limited interaction can vary by course and instructor, with some describing faculty as being occasionally active on discussion forums, to other courses being highly automated, resulting in no instructor interaction at all. For example, Participant 1 stated, "With faculty for the online courses I don't interact with them much. I don't hear from the teacher at all for my third online course." Participant 2 has a similar experience, "We really are only aware of her presence in the class when every few days she will post and say oh like I've returned grades." In comparison, some students cited that on campus interactions with faculty could occur outside the classroom with review sessions and helping one connect to other students.

Options and Ease. Students also described limited options and a lack of ease in the interactions they have in the online environment. In one case, a group project was limited to only allowing student communication to take place in a discussion forum, which made communication difficult for Participant 2:

> It's a little weird because our professor only allows us to work on the group
> project through a thread. She can't monitor like whose actually working, if we use
> something like Google docs or Gmail, which everyone else in the universe uses to
> do this type of stuff.

Other options for interacting did not appear to be used in the courses. Participants described a lack of access to same-time and/or face-to-face communication, such as video conferencing or chatting features. In comparison, they cited options available to on

campus students that they did not have an equivalent for, such as students could participate in clubs, study groups, and tutor fellow students. Participant 4 took many hybrid courses and preferred those due to the additional opportunities for interactions they introduced. The student was able to get involved with clubs and student senate, leading to the building of relationships with other students. Participant 4 stated, "I've been able to participate more and more with you know different peers different clubs, different groups so it's been great." Having these additional options for interaction is not possible for fully online students who are unable to come to campus.

Students also described a lack of ease when dealing with administrative aspects of being an online student. Participant 2, who lives outside of the area, had no other option but to try to register and pay completely at a distance. She described a lack of clarity and ease in the process.

It was a little difficult to figure out exactly which steps were necessary for me to get enrolled in the class and pay and actually like register. I kind of had to get on the phone with people to tell me what to do, and there was also a bunch of other little random details that are not really elucidated through email or ANGEL.

Others, who could come to campus, simply did so because the other options were not as easy or clear for them. They also described interactions with faculty to be "easier" on campus compared to online.

Feelings. For the most part, students' feelings surrounding interactions were not conducive for a sense of school community. There was a general feeling that interactions were essential, but that they were not adequate. When asked how the interactions made

them feel some of the words they used were awkward, frustrating, odd, pointless, like a struggle, cheated, weird, confusing, and anxious. When interacting with other students, they felt it was a struggle and frustrating trying to collaborate. They described reaching out to others as frustrating, weird, and pointless: "There is a way we could privately reply, but it almost seems pointless" (Participant 1). If they reach out to other students for help and no one responded quickly, they felt it is easy to be left confused still about their questions. Using email to contact another student felt awkward.

Similarly, they described contacting faculty by phone as awkward. One student felt cheated by the lack of interaction with faculty in one course. Others felt frustrated when trying to interact with faculty. Participants described enjoying opportunities to talk with faculty, but not feeling like it is possible online. They felt they could only reach out if they have a question: "The professors just kind of teach the class. You don't really talk to the professor unless you have specific questions" (Participant 6). Another felt anxious when trying to register and pay for classes. One student felt more mature and professional when interacting online, but that was one of the few positive feelings mentioned from interactions.

Implications. When asked what a sense of school community looks and feels like, students spoke about things that they felt were missing and about what was needed for a sense of school community. They felt that interactions are limited and that impacted the community feeling. Many cited that same time communication is missing, and there needs to be technology solutions to support building an online community. In addition to students not being able to come to campus, they explained that some faculty do not have

an office for students to go to, so email is the only option. There is no face-to-face communication for someone at a distance at all. Participants saw interactions with students as an essential part of a sense of school community. They also wished faculty would be more involved with discussions. In general, they felt there needs to be more interaction and more options available. The environment for interaction would be clear and easy to follow.

Participants also discussed aspects related to a sense of school community that they felt could impact successful course completion. They felt that community increases involvement. The ability to share with other students was an important part. It can be hard to contact instructors, and that can impact success. They also spoke of how a lack of instructor interaction and technical problems could impact grades. Many students felt that online courses are missing the ability to hear the professor talk and have spontaneous conversations. In general, they felt that additional and easier ways to contact instructors was needed.

When I asked participants how they would approach creating a sense of school community, they focused on increasing interaction with students and faculty, and expanding options to meet that need. Participants wanted to increase ungraded communication options for students, have better communication with everyone, increase student-teacher interactions, increase and track engagement, and provide means for collaboration and support. Some examples were to provide a more interactive virtual classroom, online chat rooms for people in similar courses, to fix the email system so students receive information pertinent to them, and provide a chance to meet in person.

Sense of Belonging

The next dominant theme that emerged was a lack of a sense of belonging. They did not feel they really knew each other nor have common goals. There was an impersonal feeling from their interactions that leaves them feeling very indifferent and removed. They discussed not being able to see each other and ways that a sense of belonging is important for a sense of school community.

Disconnection. A common comment about other students and faculty was that they do not know them. One participant talked about not knowing where the other students are academically and that it is easier to know them in hybrid courses. It is hard to tell if students have any common goals. Participants gave the same type of response in regards to faculty. They commented that they only know them "virtually". Participant 4 was able to meet a faculty member face-to-face after the course was done and continually used the word "enlightening" to describe the experience:

> It was kind of weird in a way, kind of enlightening too, cause it kind of put all of the classroom work and everything that the guy had said to you know, kind of concluded it for me if you will, put it together. Wrapped it up in a nice little present.

Others found connecting to be difficult, citing it was hard for some to share thoughts online or gain an understanding without being able to chat easily. It was easier to connect and get to know each other's personalities face-to-face. Some felt it was uncomfortable to talk with students they do not know; however, another found it more comfortable to share her thoughts online. Students felt a large disconnect with faculty,

describing it as impersonal, feeling like a number, feeling cold, or just indifferent. There does not appear to be any type of positive connection between the participants and faculty. Participant 9 stated:

> I'm just kind of like a number, it's not like when you're in class they learn your name, they understand your learning style, they um they will talk to you and ask you about your day – where versus online they are just like, ok you need to do this this and this. And then you send it in and that's all there is to it.

In general, participants said that the online environment felt removed, detached, impersonal, and pretend.

Participants said they did not feel any camaraderie or sense of belonging. They felt alone, not valued, forgotten, invisible, and isolated. One participant felt valued by other students, but most did not express that feeling. With faculty, they did not feel particularly valued online. One felt that faculty did not pay attention to their work, others described a feeling of being forgotten and alone. Faculty seemed invisible to some. On campus, participants felt that they can really know someone and have common goals. They also felt more valued on campus with faculty.

Implications. When asked what a sense of school community would look like, participants described a greater sense of belonging. Interactions help to reduce the loneliness feeling of online learning. They said they would know each other better, have common goals, and they could build relationships. Everyone would feel included and like they were part of something. They mentioned fitting in and having a camaraderie feeling. It would not feel isolating, but instead like a big family.

They felt that you need to see people in order to connect to them and that there is no school community feeling because they could not see each other. When asked, they also felt that a sense of belonging was important for successful course completion. Participants needed to feel connected and involved in a "real thing". It was uncomfortable for some to reach out for help, without feeling connected. They discussed ways that they feel a greater sense of school community can be created. They mentioned needing a chance and way to get to know each other. Some ideas were to include images in profiles, introduction videos/audio, lecture videos/audio, and small group projects. In general, they wanted to have more options and opportunities for interaction in order to create better connections with people.

Support

The third theme that emerged from the research concerned how students perceived support. Support can be actual offerings from the institution, as well as a feeling they get from having relationships with people. They discussed how they describe it currently, what it would be like if they had a greater sense of school community, how support relates to completion, and what they felt was needed to feel more supported.

Current perceptions of support. In general, students had a greater feeling of support when they took on campus classes. One student, who took both online and on campus courses, used the on campus tutoring center for her online English course. Even though there is online tutoring available, most of the participants were not aware of the option, and those that were, had not used it yet. In addition to not knowing what support was available, some students felt that in the online environment, faculty could not see

them struggling. Participant 6 stated "In class [campus] the professor can see you struggle. They can't see you struggle online." The lack of clarity about available resources, combined with the feeling of disconnection from faculty, can leave some students feeling alone.

For some adults, they can find support at home. However, Participant 5 did not have support from family, but felt supported and validated when she was accepted into the college's honor society, "I was really happy cause my family was all against me going to college in the first place." Providing a connection and acknowledgement of her hard work was important for her continued success.

The topic of support also came up when discussing what a sense of school community would look like in the online environment. They described more collaboration and communication between students to support each other through projects and to ask questions when they were confused. Participant 4 described what a sense of school community would look like as "Everybody is willing to go the extra mile for a fellow classmate." There was also mention that a support system would be present and they would have a place to go for support when one needed it. The idea of feeling supported carried into the discussion about successful course completion.

Implications. Participants felt that a support system is crucial for success. Participant 1 commented, "I guess I need support personally from other people to help get me through." and "A greater sense of community would help build that support." Participant 2 mentioned that classmates could be a great resource, "a living resource" that can really help each other. In contrast, they felt they had more support from others when

they were on campus. Something small, such as help with submitting a document, can have a big impact.

Another support related item that emerged was time management. Participants felt that time management skills were needed for successful completion of courses. Many mentioned working in addition to attending school and that adults were extremely busy. Participant 1 stated "I feel like I am struggling getting my homework done on time all the time." Participant 9 mentioned that sometimes faculty will assign due dates last minute, "…they give us due dates the day before, so I get really frustrated trying to get everything done and I end up stressing myself out." Last minute assignments can be extremely overwhelming for busy adults, which increases stress levels.

Participants also discussed what they thought would be needed in regards to support and a sense of school community. Feeling like there is a support system is something they wanted. Having that feeling would reduce some of the stress of being an online adult student. The actual institutional supports are important as well, but merely having them alone was not enough; they needed to be clearly communicated and easy to access. Participant 8 explained, "I would have to make time to go to campus to get a tutor there. I honestly don't know if they have online help of things like that." Several students mentioned needing an orientation for online courses, whether it was for taking online courses in general or specific to the course they were taking. There was also a sense that communication needed improvement. Specifically, awareness of what was expected, how to use technology, strategies to be successful, sharing of campus events and activities, and how to get support.

Educational Values

The last theme that emerged from the interviews was educational values. Values involved concerns they had for how to create a sense of school community. Many of these topics connect back to other aspects of Rovai's CPM, such as commitment, course availability, program fit, and time. They emerged from the students when they thought about creating a sense of school community and as their final thoughts. Participants discussed the values of time, commitment, and asynchronous nature of online courses.

One aspect centered on valuing commitment. Students mentioned that a sense of school community required a commitment and time to develop. Several students stated that there was no sense of school community from online courses for them. "I guess in a way I don't feel overly a part of the college. I am not there. I'm basically just signing into a class" (Participant 8). Participant 3 explained that the community feeling could get lost online, because people do not have a sense of commitment that you have in other community environments.

It is common to have initial icebreaker discussions where students introduce themselves. However, students did not feel that was enough time commitment to build a community feeling. Participant 1 said, "It wasn't enough time to get to know each other to be able to rely on each other in a classmate type of way." Participant 9 further explained that "You don't get to know the people very well, it's just your with them for a semester versus if you are in a degree program you are going to be with the people all through your degree." For a sense of school community to build, it would require a longer commitment of time and expansion beyond one individual class.

Above all, students consistently valued asynchronous online courses for their overall fit. After students spent much of the interviews talking about what was missing in the online environment, they were very clear to note the importance of having fully online courses as an option. Students used the word grateful to describe how they felt about having online courses. Some requested that more courses be available online.

Online courses provide balance, options, and an opportunity to work on their own time. Participants said the convenience factor is one of the main draws for an adult. Many said online was the only way they could take courses, because online classes fit into their busy schedules. Convenience also came up when talking about adding more interactive options. They wanted more interaction, but also had concern for anything that would require face-to-face or synchronous sessions. They did not want to lose the convenience factor.

A few participants talked about the importance of asking students for their input, designing for student's goals, and creating solutions from student feedback. Participant 3 said, "It would be important to have input maybe through a simple survey" and to ask "what are you hoping to get out of this, ask did you accomplish what you had thought". Participant 2 also discussed the importance of knowing the students stating, "I would want to know who is exactly taking online classes. Then you can start to work out, you know the design, the system that will best facilitate the users experience to meet these goals". Finally, Participant 9 appreciated that students were being asked about their online experiences, "I really appreciate that someone's looking into how to make it

better". This research study is meeting the need of seeking student input. The values provide important insights when trying to build a greater sense of school community.

Students mentioned how appreciative they were to see someone research the issue. There needs to be enough time and commitment for school community to develop and the convenience factor of fully online courses must stay intact. Students valued the access online courses provide to higher education, while acknowledging that there was room for improvement.

Credibility and Accuracy of Analysis Results

Showing accuracy and credibility of qualitative studies is an important step to ensure confidence in the results of the research (Anney, 2014). Earlier I described the important steps of recording the interviews to aid with the accuracy of the transcription, conducting member checking, practicing reflexivity, and writing with clarity and transparency to show a sound methodological approach to the study. In this section, I address my exploration of rival explanations and negative cases.

During data analysis, I was careful to explore rival explanations of the findings through rival analysis. Rival analysis involves carefully considering other arguments and ways of interpreting the data (Patton, 2002; Tobin, 2010; Yin, 2009). One potential rival explanation of the data could be related to feelings of trust and safety; two other important aspects of the social community dimension within a sense of school community. Some may argue that a lack of feelings of trust and safety is involved in the students' lack of a sense of school community. However, students did not speak to trust and safety during the interviews, but to a feeling of knowing, connecting, and belonging;

and it would be conjecture to conclude that trust or safety issues were the reason behind a lack of a belonging or interaction. Further data collection, specifically addressing trust and safety is required to determine if they are an issue.

During analysis, it is important to identify cases that do not meet the norms of the other cases and do not meet the researcher's expectations (Anney, 2014; Brodsky, 2008). In this study, Participant 3 was a negative case. During the interview, some of her responses were more positive than other students' responses. She described feeling a sense of belonging that the other participants did not mention. "It really does seem like everyone is generally interested in doing well, those things really help to want to be involved versus not having people log in often or not care really, so it's been really positive." She mentioned several times her appreciation for a small class size. "I think there are maybe 12 of us, so really nice intimate environment." However, similar to the other students, she described interactions to be mostly text-based and missing something.

As Participant 3 continued to talk and answer subsequent interview questions, she felt a sense of school community is important for course completion and described needed improvements. "I think it's one of the things that are helpful to make it worth it and effective." She thinks that community can make students want to be involved more and not feel like a number. "I do wish that there was say a webinar once a week as a way to maybe have a discussion with multiple people weighing in almost like messaging format so that it was really consistent and there wasn't a delay." She recommended communications that would incorporate on campus activities so students see everything

happening on campus and creating collaborative ways to share unique characteristics that everyone has.

Finally, she felt that classes could be overwhelming and time consuming. A way to support each other, which does not take up too much time, would be helpful. For this participant, a sense of belonging was not as much of an issue, however the need for a larger sense of school community was still relevant and seen through the limited interactions, need for support and clarity, and need for alignment of educational values.

Summary of Results

Four main themes emerged from the research: (a) interaction, (b) sense of belonging, (c) support, and (d) educational values. These themes were drawn from the coded quotes of the interview questions, which were created based on the research questions. The central research question for this study was, "How do online students at FCC describe a sense of school community when completing online courses?" The first subquestion, "In what ways do online students perceive a sense of school community as being present at FCC?" was addressed through the themes as not being sufficiently present due to limited interaction, lack of a sense of belonging, and limited feelings of support. The second subquestion, "What aspects of a sense of school community do students at FCC perceive as contributing to successful completion of online courses?" was also addressed within the themes. Students felt that increasing interaction, a sense of belonging, and feelings of support, while considering values around time, commitment, and asynchronous nature of online courses, would be important for developing a sense of school community and support the successful completion of online courses.

Conclusion

This doctoral project utilized an instrumental qualitative case study methodology. Low online course completion rates are a complex problem that is intricately connected with the setting. To explore the research questions, I used open-ended semistructured interviews with nine participants. Participant selection was criterion based and purposeful. Procedures to ensure I completed the study in an ethical manner included using informed consent, doing no harm to the participants, and ensuring confidentiality. The online learning coordinator facilitated access to the participants. Case and cross-case analysis occurred, with pawing and marking, and cutting and sorting of text, until four themes emerged: (a) interaction, (b) a sense of belonging, (c) support, and (d) educational values. I maintained accuracy and credibility through recording the interviews, member checking, discussing rival explanations and negative cases, and maintaining reflexivity through reflective journaling. Clarity and transparency of method also lend to trustworthiness.

In the next section, I describe the development of a white paper project to address the themes. The development of a white paper as the project for this study allowed me to make research based recommendations on how FCC can approach institutional processes and policy changes, as well as needed pedagogical changes. The recommendations will increase interaction, a sense of belonging, and support, while aligning with students educational values.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The aim of this doctoral project was to explore the phenomenon of low course completion rates in online community college courses using the lens of a persistence theory that describes a sense of school community as being an important aspect of this problem. Previous researchers have explored the importance of a sense of community in the online classroom for course completion but stops short of discussing the importance of having a greater sense of community with the institution as a whole. A sense of school community is an important concept in the online community college setting where students are not taking full online programs or necessarily taking courses as a cohort.

In many cases students are taking general education courses that include students from many majors, some completing most of their studies online and others taking a mix of online, hybrid, and face-to-face courses. Students often need to rebuild a sense of community in each course they take since the instructors and students change. Providing an overall sense of community with the institution and other students in similar courses and programs can help sustain a sense of community throughout their time at the college.

This section outlines the project chosen based on the research results, theory, and literature reviewed. The project is a white paper that describes the problem, the framework and methods used to investigate the problem, the results of the research, and recommendations for how to address the problem. I describe the goals and rationale for choosing the white paper project, review the literature on using a white paper, describe

the recommendations included in the paper, and discuss the project implementation and evaluation plans.

Description and Goals

The project I created for this study was a position paper, also known as a white paper. Authors typically write white papers as a persuasive approach to outlining a position on a problem and the possible solution for the problem (Stelzner, 2007). I begin the white paper by describing the problem of low online course completion rates and provide information about the research study methodology and results. I then made recommendations for changes in practice, based on the results and current research/theory. The problem I addressed in this study and with this project is low course completion rates in online general education community college courses. The project addressed the problem by providing FCC with clear recommendations about changes they can make to their online program that can support increasing a sense of school community and subsequent online course completion rates.

The goals of the project were: to help FCC understand the problem and the significance of the problem for their local area; to inform FCC of the theory, research, and practices that relate to the problem; and to provide recommendations on how to address the problem based on the research results, literature, and theory. The ultimate goal of the project was to influence changes to the online program that will then increase the rate of online course completion, through increasing adult students' sense of school community.

Rationale

Educational technology vendors, associations and research groups, and institutions often use white papers to take a stance concerning a certain aspect of education. For example, a simple Google search of "using white papers in higher education" returns 100 million results of white papers used by such groups. White papers are also a common tool used in government and business to influence policy and process, by providing a research-based rationale for addressing a problem (Stelzner, 2007). White papers educate the reader on the problem, propose a solution to the problem, and defend the solution (Marston, 2010). Often part marketing tool, white papers are written to educate and persuade, often doing so in a style similar to that of a brochure (Stelzner, 2007). While white papers range in length, with 5-12 pages being average (Stelzner, 2007), the focus of my white paper is academic in nature; thus, the length is longer than the average marketing or business white paper.

A benefit of using a white paper is the final product is easy to read and makes a clear, strong statement. There is not one single curriculum or training project alone that will help with the different issues the research results identified. However, multiple recommendations are possible with a white paper.

The data analysis reported in Section 2 had four themes that emerged from the study: interaction, sense of belonging, support, and educational values. For interaction, the results showed that students want more interaction, additional ways to interact, easier ways to interact, and ungraded ways to interact. For a sense of belonging, students reported having no sense of belonging and felt there should be more use of images,

videos, audio and small group projects. For support theme, students reported a need for clarity and knowledge about the available resources, time management skills, improved communication, and training on technology and success strategies. For educational values, students expressed the importance of convenience that online options need to be asynchronous, a community takes time to build, and that online options are extremely important for them. Students want more online courses to be available and less policy around who can take them. A white paper project fits with the data analysis because of the varied, complex results found. A white paper helps the institution understand the depth of the problem, and through the lens of a sense of school community, how the students perceive their online course experience.

I addressed the problem through the recommendations in the white paper, based on the study results, theory, and literature review of recent research. The recommendations included the creation of an online orientation course that continues as a community space and resource for students, and the inclusion of video technology tools to facilitate interactions and engagement. Faculty, staff, and students will need training on the technical and pedagogical aspects of using video for student interaction and engagement. A connected recommendation is to add an online curriculum instructional designer position who can create and sustain the orientation space and asynchronous video training.

Review of the Literature

I conducted this literature review using the Walden Library and Google Scholar. Databases used included, Education Research Complete, ERIC, Proquest Central,

Academic Research Complete, and Science Direct. Search terms used to reach saturation included varying combinations of the following search terms: *position paper, white paper, writing white papers, white paper use in education, educational technology, online orientations, asynchronous videos, interaction, engagement, building community, online learning, distance learning, and community college*. I omitted literature that focused on orientations for face-to-face programs.

I divided this review of the literature into two distinct sections. The first is devoted to the chosen project genre, white papers. Peer reviewed research literature on the topic of white papers is limited. White papers are generally thought of as grey literature and, therefore, tend to be discussed outside of traditional publication channels. However, some peer-reviewed articles from the business, marketing, and technology fields discuss white papers. The first part of the literature review provides an overview of the genre, their use in education, and white paper development criteria. Based on the results of the research study, the second part of the review discusses the theories used in the development of the content of the project, and the current research on orientation programs and video technology for online learners.

Project Genre

About white papers. The project genre is a white paper. White papers are a type of grey literature. Grey literature includes documents created by governments, academics, business, and industry that are not included in traditional, searchable, commercial publication routes (Juricek, 2009). Grey literature can be hard to find and may not have undergone a peer-review process. However, the purpose of a white paper is not to

advance scholarship. White papers are targeted, purposeful, persuasive documents, intended for a specific audience (Juricek, 2009). The goal is to educate the reader on the problem and the solution to their problem. A white paper is ideal for communicating the problem, results, and solution for this doctoral study. Their nature may also contribute to the fact that peer-reviewed research on white papers is hard to find (Juricek, 2009). White paper literature tends to focus on difficulties of finding white papers or how to write a white paper.

Juricek (2009) explored the ability for business librarians to find relevant white papers by completing a series of database and web searches rather than obtaining directly from the authors website. They found that Google searches were helpful if they knew the exact title and author of the paper, but traditional databases did not result in finding the white papers. According to Juricek (2009), white papers can be valuable sources of information, as long as they are analyzed through the critical lens that one uses when evaluating any information source. White papers have developed into a cottage industry, especially for technology companies (Juricek, 2009). Educational technology companies that focus on online learning are frequent authors of white papers.

Powell (2012) and Willerton (2012) both looked at using white papers as an assignment for teaching students in communications and business orientation courses. White papers provide a way to connect academia with relevant workplace skills (Powell, 2012; Willerton, 2012). White papers were initially used as a way for governmental agencies to make policy statements (Powell, 2012; Willerton, 2012). Willerton also explains that white papers are flexible and adaptable to many different situations.

The use of white papers in education is common, especially with educational groups, associations, and educational technology companies. As Juricek (2009) explained, finding a white paper using internet searching is best when you know the author and title. Targeting known associations and organizations in higher education can also assist with locating white papers. The Community College Research Center at the Teachers College, Columbia University, is an example where one can find papers and research reports. The publications on their site do not specifically use the term white paper, but are composed of papers that discuss a problem that is research-based with proposed solutions (Community College Research Center, 2015). The American Association of Community Colleges (2015) also has a section devoted to research reports and white papers that they believe are relevant for community colleges. Other higher education organizations such as Educause (2015), a higher education information technology organization, and the American Library Association (2015) have white papers, briefs, and reports on their websites as well.

Community colleges and those academics dealing with the use of technology for learning are commonly the intended audience for white papers. White papers blend academic and professional skills (Powell, 2012). A mix of academic and professional skills makes a white paper an ideal project for my audience, allowing me to focus on the academic and research basis for the recommendations to the problem, while presenting the information in a professional way that will be easily readable by busy professional academics.

White paper development criteria. Writing a white paper is akin to writing a persuasive essay, only it is problem and research-based, resulting in a clear solution. White papers should contain meaningful content that teaches the reader something new (Bly, 2010). The author should use a conversational, yet authoritative tone (Marston, 2010). The overall structure should include identification of the problem, background or history of the problem, a solid case for the solution, and end with a call to action (Powell, 2012). Chunking of the content with headings and subheadings was used to aid in readability (Stelzner, 2007).

The visual appearance of the white paper is important. Powell (2012) suggested writers use carefully thought out imagery, color, and white space to represent the content. I used strategically placed quotes to break up the text and solidify a point. There should also be a visually appealing cover page with the author, title, date, and graphical elements (Powell, 2012; Stelzner, 2007). Powell (2012) and Stelzner (2007) disagreed on whether there needs to be an executive summary. Powell mentions it as a step in the process, where Stelzner recommended that an executive summary or abstract can give away the best part of the paper, preventing the audience from reading it. However, Stelzner focused on the marketing aspect of a white paper. Since the white paper for this project is not being used as a marketing tool, an executive summary makes sense for the audience. It provides the college administrators with an overview of what to expect from the paper.

The title of the white paper should try to use keywords, active verbs, colons, and job titles while refraining from humor, organizational names (Stelzner, 2007). Stelzner also recommended testing the title, which I did with colleagues and peers. Most white

papers do not include a conclusion/summary. However, if one is used it should be brief, highlight the solution, and use words other than summary/conclusion, such as closing thoughts (Stelzner, 2007). The white paper for this project uses a brief closing thoughts section.

Guiding Theories

Rovai's (2003) composite persistence model (CPM) is a comprehensive theory of adult student persistence in distance learning. The school community aspects of Rovai's model and research was the framework for this research study, however, other aspects of the model are directly applicable to the results of the study, and thus informed the content of the project. While the research results of this study grew from questions specific to a sense of school community, the results show that the distance learning research included in the framework hold merit and can contribute to a student's sense of school community.

The CPM highlights factors that are important prior to and after admission. Prior to admissions, one of the important student skills is time management, which emerged from this study as part of the support theme. After admissions, the CPM includes many internal factors that are important for persistence.

The internal factors include five special needs unique to distance learning; consistency and clarity of online programs, policies, and procedures; self-esteem; identification with the school; interpersonal relationships; and ready access to support services (Rovai, 2003). The results of this study included a need for interaction and a sense of belonging that are a part of identification with the school and interpersonal relationships. Interactions are needed to foster identification with the institution and

interpersonal relationships with students, faculty, and staff, which then can contribute to a sense of belonging. The other two themes support and educational values speak to the special need of requiring clarity of the online program, policies, and procedures, and ready access to support services.

According to the CPM, these factors can be addressed through orientation programs, having easy access to all program policies and procedures, issuing school identification cards to online students, social integration efforts with peers, faculty, and staff, and ready access to support services, such as college offices, tutoring, technology support and training (Rovai, 2003). These factors have influenced the recommendation of an online orientation program that can provide the access and clarity about programs, policies, procedures, and support services. Combined with the study results, the CPM also directly influences the recommendation that the orientation bridges into a school community space that is always available for students.

The other theory that influenced the content of the white paper is Astin's theory of student involvement. "Student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (Astin, 1999, p. 528). The theory emerged from a study of college dropouts that looked at what could affect persistence, finding that involvement was connected to each effect found that contributed positively to persistence (Astin, 1999). Astin theorized that if involvement could be thought of as being on a continuum, then dropping out is total noninvolvement at the far end of the continuum. Astin (1999) postulated five key aspects of the involvement theory:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects.

2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum…

3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features.

4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.

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

Astin (1999) also discussed the higher rate of dropping out at community colleges, where students are typically in situations that make involvement more difficult, such as being commuters, working, and attending part-time. Adult students attending online courses also often have additional time restraints related to childcare. Educators need to think of time as a valuable resource. Every institutional practice and policy should be examined in relation to the time that students need to invest in those endeavors relative to their academic and social needs (Astin, 1999). Efficiency and clarity within practices, policies, and processes are essential.

The research results of this study directly referenced both the need for time management for students, the importance of asynchronous online course availability, and the need for interaction. As Astin (1999) theorized, interactions are quantitative and qualitative in nature. The study participants interviewed reported both qualitative aspects

of interaction, discussing how they feel and think about their experience, and quantitative aspects about how often they interact. Astin's theory, combined with the research results, directly influenced the idea that involvement by increasing opportunities for interaction, in a way that allows students some flexibility with the time they have available to participate, is critical. Faculty and staff can utilize easy to use technology, with minor time investments to learn, to create more opportunities for interaction, involvement, and engagement in the online classroom and orientation spaces. Any training on the tools should be equally short and available for students on their own time.

Current Research

The theories and research results informed the focus of the review of the literature on online orientation programs and using video technologies to increase interaction and connectedness in the online environment. The literature review then informed the specific recommendations in the white paper. These recommendations include the development of a robust online orientation program and community space, and the adoption of video technology to increase interaction and engagement.

Orientations for online students. Orientations are an excellent approach for helping students build a connection to the institution, learn about the supports and resources available, and learn the skills that they need to be successful online. They also provide a non-threatening, ungraded opportunity for students to interact and meet other students. As described by Rovai (2003), they can also help persistence, which is the ultimate goal of this study.

Increases in persistence. Jones (2013) reported on an optional face-to-face

orientation for online students that was made mandatory and fully online. All online or

hybrid students were required to take it. In the previous orientation, students who could

not get to campus did not benefit from the orientation (Jones, 2013). The new version

was self-paced, sequential, and required completion of each module to move to the next

one. It concluded with a final quiz they must pass with an 80 or better (Jones, 2013). The

orientation was able to address some of the skills and knowledge students were missing,

such as time management, how to study/learn online, awareness of available student

services and how to access those services, as well as technical knowledge needed for

learning online (Jones, 2013). After the orientation was made online and mandatory the

retention of students increased by about 10% on average. Students and faculty self-

reported that the orientation improved students' readiness for online courses and help

desk tickets decreased. An important aspect of the Jones study was the transition of the

orientation to being fully online and mandatory. The fully online aspect is consistent with

factors that emerged within the theme of educational values in this study, such as the

need to be mindful of students' time and the importance of online asynchronous

activities.

While not ideal for the specific context of FCC, a few face-to-face orientation

programs also have been successful in increasing persistence, showing the importance of

orientations in general, and the specific topics covered in them. Gilmore and Lyons

(2012) implemented a face-to-face orientation that helped increase retention in an online

nursing program. The orientation covered topics such as how to access the library and use

the course management system by having students take part in a practice course (Gilmore & Lyons, 2012). The orientation ran three times, each time using feedback and data for continuous improvement. By the end of the third session, attrition decreased from 20 percent to 1 percent and student satisfaction increased by over 20 percent (Gilmore & Lyons, 2012).

Rice, Rojjanasrirat, and Trachsel (2013) discussed structural changes to an online nursing program to increase student satisfaction and decrease attrition. One of the changes was the addition of a 3-day mandatory orientation program for new students that focused on resources and skills needed to be a successful online nursing student (Rice, Rojjanasrirat, & Trachsel, 2013). Using both qualitative and quantitative data, attrition was tracked over three cohorts of students, one cohort before the changes and two after (Rice et al., 2013). The attrition rate continually decreased in each subsequent cohort from a high of 43% to a low of 7.3% (Rice et al., 2013). Across the three cohorts, students who withdrew cited personal reasons consistently, but there was a drop in academic reasons in the later cohorts. Clearly communicating the resources available and skills needed for online students is the common theme with these programs.

Interaction, belonging, and support. According to Britto and Rush (2013), online orientations can help provide a sense of community and a sense of belonging, which addresses the theme of this study of students not feeling a sense of belonging. Orientations can also address technology training needs, provide an initial connection to other students, faculty, and staff, and provide information about support services, all crucial to the findings of this study. The design of orientations can include the use of

interactive tools to provide first-hand experience and a level of comfort in using them to reach out to students and faculty (Britto & Rush, 2013). Experience with tools may remove the awkward feeling some students mentioned about reaching out for help. Britto and Rush (2013) wanted to provide comparable services and increase completion for online students, so they implemented a mandatory online orientation. They have met their first goal and are collecting further data to determine its effectiveness in increasing completion rates.

Some programs measured student satisfaction of orientation programs. Cho (2012) looked at student satisfaction after implementing a new orientation program. It was developed to go beyond technical training by including how to learn in the online environment, focusing on communicating and interacting. A quantitative survey of students indicated they highly valued the orientation, with qualitative comments that were all positive (Cho, 2012). Helping students understand how to communicate and interact with others in the online environment is critical to building community online.

Dixon et al. (2012) created an online orientation to assist students with finding relevant information about the program and courses, and help them understand how to be successful. The orientation included time management, how to create portfolios, how to access student support, and academic integrity (Dixon et al., 2012). Requirements of the program included that it must be online, self-sustaining, and non-facilitated (Dixon et al., 2012). The orientation was created by students, providing unique student perspectives on how to be successful (Dixon et al., 2012). The student perspective is a strength of the orientation, and the design choices provide a window into what they thought was

valuable from a student perceptive. For example, they used a video tour of the campus in an effort to provide a connection to the college (Dixon et al., 2012). A student survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the orientation after completion resulted in ratings of agree or strongly agree. However, the one thing lacking in the orientation is facilitation. If part of the goal of orientation is to build connections between students and faculty and staff, it would have been best to have faculty and staff presence.

Tutty and Ratliff (2012) argued that distance learning should look at student services provided for on-campus programs that may work when adapted for online. They referenced the Tennessee Technical Centers, whose online programs have excellent graduation and job placement rates by offering competency-based education, self-paced modes, foundational skills, and strong student support services (Tutty & Ratliff, 2012). They include having a mandatory online orientation. Orientation should provide students with clear information about services and program information and an introduction to faculty and staff (Tutty & Ratliff, 2012). Tutty and Ratliff (2012) also stress the need for upfront information about programs because "Students are enrolled in programs, not just single courses" (p. 918). Understanding students from a holistic view is important beyond just providing information to students. It is essential to helping build a wider sense of school community since students are part of something bigger than one course.

Similarly, Carruth, Broussard, Waldmeier, Gauthier, and Mixon (2010), explain that institutional commitment can be communicated when orientations include training on how to navigate and access the support and resources available for online students. Carruth et al. (2010) developed and implemented an online orientation that expanded

beyond just technical skills to include how to access and use support resources. Student course evaluations previously indicated that they are anxious before taking online courses (Carruth et al., 2010). Evaluations after the implementation of the orientation showed that students felt better prepared (Carruth et al., 2010). Orientation can reduce some of those initial fears.

Stewart, Goodson, Miertschin, Norwood, and Ezell (2013) used a qualitative case study to determine what student supports were available and needed. A wide variety of methods were used that included interviews with students, faculty, and staff, looking through available documents, such as websites, catalogues, and support materials, and using observed student outcomes derived from course evaluations, institutional effectiveness reports, discussion boards, chats, and student surveys (Stewart et al., 2013). They found a need for a specific mandatory online orientation in addition to the typical new student campus orientation (Stewart et al., 2013). Stewart et al. (2013) created the online orientation to include information on the learning management system and student services resources available for students, such as the library, bookstore, careers services, identification cards, and cost information, as well as success strategies for being an online student. Having an online orientation contributed to the overall quality of the educational program (Stewart et al., 2013). Stewart et al. also described the need to review offerings often, as technology changes quickly and faculty and students will need to keep current and knowledgeable about the changes. Having regular technology training as new tools become available is important for online programs.

Wozniak, Pizzica, and Mahony (2012) used a design based research framework to evaluate student use of the last phase of a three-stage innovative online orientation program called *GettingOnTrack*. The program included three phases, *GetReal*, *GetStarted*, and *GetLearning* (Wozinak, Pizzica, & Mahoney, 2012). The first phase, *GetReal*, occurs prior to student admission and enrollment, and *GetStarted*, is provided once a student enrolls to learn the basics of getting in and navigating the learning management system (Wozinak et al., 2012). *GetLearning,* the focus of the study, is an online orientation course within the learning management system (Wozinak et al., 2012). *GetLearning* moves beyond navigation into communication and collaboration in the online environment with faculty and peers, using group work, submitting assignments, and learning related policies and procedures of the institution (Wozinak et al., 2012).

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected over two iterations of cohorts, 179 students in the first semester and 292 in the second (Wozinak et al., 2012). While students found the orientation to be useful and enabled them to be successful in both cohorts, an interesting pattern of use showed that 25% of the students returned to the orientation over 10 times during the course of the semester (Wozinak et al., 2012). Return visits to the orientation is important and relates to the idea of orientation not being a one-time event, but providing continued access and support for online students. Moderation of the online environment was also crucial, not just for discussion forums, but using the LMS tracking tools to address student engagement early on. Based on their research Wozniak et al. (2012) recommend engaging learners to understand how it will help their academic journey, having orientation extend over time, embedding orientation in

academic disciplines, and having a strong instructor presence in the orientation. Spurgin

and Childress (2009) studied the difference in community in the classroom versus within

the wider academic disciplines. Spurgin and Childress found the same lack of wider

community, and recommended the building of online discipline-based communities in

conjunction with online orientations, while keeping the time constraints of students in

mind.

Students who participate in online learning communities build relationships with a

variety of students, faculty, and staff, supporting retention efforts (Calhoun & Green,

2015). Online learning communities support asynchronous connections that online and

community college students may not otherwise be able to access (Calhoun & Green,

2015). Nye (2015) found that the implementation of an online academic learning

community encouraged a sense of belonging. Students participated in online forums,

accessed news and announcements, and read about alumni (Nye, 2015). Some of the most

important aspects of the community include the sense of belonging students feel to the

academic community and the access it provides to information (Nye, 2015).

The recommendations from the literature reviewed, along with the results of the

study showing a need to build a sense of school community, contributes to the

recommendation that the orientation space stays open as a community space with

optional opportunities to interact with students and faculty in similar disciplines. For

example, incentives can be created for faculty and students to participate, and staff can be

tasked with holding online events/discussion opportunities to bring students and faculty

together.

According to Park, Perry, and Edwards (2011), attending an online orientation can also help students with interpersonal relationships and connecting with the institution's values and mission. Educators can create mandatory orientations for those at a distance using asynchronous sessions that utilize multimedia tools (Park, Perry, & Edwards, 2011). Park, Perry, and Edwards emphasized that no matter what, students should be able to see and hear each other. My study revealed that students do indeed want and need a visual and auditory connection in the online environment. The technology needed to create a rich online orientation program can also be used in the online classroom to do the same, which leads into to the recommendation FCC adopts video technology.

Video technology. Sherer and Shea (2011) described different ways to incorporate videos in instruction to encourage active, engaging learning. The most common approach is for instructors to create or curate video content that students must respond to in some way, or what they called a "listening and writing assignment" (Sherer & Shea, 2011, p. 57). A variation on the respond approach that more actively involves students is to have them curate and share video content via a "collecting and archiving assignment", or work individually or collaboratively on a "short presentation assignment" where they find and analyze videos on a specific topic (Sherer & Shea, 2011, p. 58). The last approach is to have students create videos using a "student production assignment" which can be completed individually or as a team as part of assignments, projects, or online discussions (Sherer & Shea, 2011, p. 58). The instructional design options for integrating video are endless. This portion of the literature review explores how instructor

and student generated video content can impact interactions and feelings of being connected to others in the online environment.

Instructor created video content. Draus, Curran, and Trempus (2014) examined student satisfaction and engagement when an instructor included video lectures, welcome videos, discussion video prompts, and video instructions throughout the course. Instructors created some videos ahead of time, and other more informal weekly videos were created as the course progressed to integrate real-time feedback and personalization (Draus et al., 2014). Over three terms the same instructor taught nine different online sections that were included in the study, with three sections serving as a control group (Draus et al., 2014). Draus et al. (2014) developed surveys to measure student satisfaction and perceptions of the video content, and measured engagement by using the data analytics from the learning management system and video server. Compared to the control groups, satisfaction was higher and engagement increased for the students in the sections with video (Draus et al., 2014). Additionally, qualitative comments were analyzed showing students had very positive responses to the video content, with the most frequent theme being "Greater personal connection to the instructor due to video content" (Draus et al., 2014, p. 249). The theme of a greater feeling of connection is seen in other studies that incorporated instructor created video content.

Kim, Kwona, and Cho (2011) used two courses at a Korean university to survey students to determine relationships between social presence, learning satisfaction, interactivity, and media integration. Kim et al. (2011) found that social presence and learning satisfaction increased with the use of weekly videos. Interactivity was also

related to social presence; the more involved the student was, the more connected they were with others (Kim et al., 2011). The increase in connection aligns with the student interaction theory of Astin (1999) and the CPM of Rovai (2003) that informs this doctoral study project, the greater the interaction, the higher persistence and satisfaction, which having a sense of community and connection also supports.

Miller and Redman (2010) also found a greater sense of connection when they included 19 videos in an online astronomy class to create an instructor presence in the course. They surveyed 204 students on the effectiveness of the videos to create instructor presence and for explaining the content (Miller & Redman, 2010). Using a Likert scale, they found that 64.7% of students rated the videos as more than somewhat effective at creating instructor presence (Miller & Redman, 2010). Students felt more connected to the course and were more comfortable interacting from seeing and hearing the instructor (Miller & Redman, 2010). Seeing and hearing connects to the research results of this study. Students felt that they would feel more connected if they hear and see the instructor and each other.

Instructor created video feedback. In addition to delivering content, video can be used to provide feedback to students. Moore and Filling (2012) studied student perceptions of video feedback given by instructors on writing assignments in two writing intensive courses. They used a qualitative constant comparative method, analyzing video feedback, papers, questionnaires, and small group interviews with 45 students and two instructors (Moore & Filling, 2012). Findings were very positive, with students finding the video feedback to be better than written feedback (Moore & Filling, 2012). Students

noted some of the videos benefits were clarity, they provided more information, instructors encouraging tones came through, and they were motivating (Moore & Filling, 2012). These types of feelings are important for building connections between students and instructors.

Silva (2012) also studied using video feedback for writing assignments in a writing course. Half of the class received video feedback of their writing using Camtasia screen capturing software and the other half received feedback using the tracking features of Microsoft Word (Silva, 2012). Silva surveyed students on their perceptions of the two methods and access statistics were examined from the learning management system. According to Silva, students found the videos to be more personal and equated the time spent on the creation of the video as the instructor caring more. Students liked the conversational feel of the video and felt like they were talking with someone, rather than reading impersonal comments (Silva, 2012). Silva found there were direct pedagogical benefits in the quality of the student's revisions, as well as feeling a more personal connection to the instructor. In a similar study, Borup, West, and Thomas (2015) found text based communication was more efficient, but video feedback created a more supportive feeling. A blend where the instructor creates a screencast of their paper notations and returns the paper with a video is an approach to get the best of both mediums.

Instructor and student created video. Griffiths and Graham (2010) studied the impact of using asynchronous video on instructor immediacy and closeness in three online sessions. In all three sessions, students had to watch instructor created videos and

respond to questions via video clips (Griffiths & Graham, 2010). Students reported feeling closer to the instructor, and the instructor was able to learn more about the students through their videos than they previously would have learned (Griffiths & Graham, 2010). According to Griffiths and Graham, there were some technology issues with the first session, but technology advanced to the point where tools became available to mitigate the specific issues. Overall, in all three cases, the students and the instructor felt closer to each other using video.

Borup, West, and Graham (2012) explored how the use of video-based strategies affected faculty and students perception of social presence. Three different sections of an online course, with different instructors using slightly different video approaches, but similar group based assignments were used for this study (Borup et al., 2012). The participants included 18 students who were part of small groups that discussed topics each week using different video approaches (Borup et al., 2012). Two of the instructors used Voicethread, a tool for discussions that allows video, audio, or text comments, and the third instructor used YouTube to present weekly content and instructions and to have students create videos for discussions and assignments (Borup et al., 2012). Instructors used the ability of both tools to have students create video introductions and encouraged them to leave video comments to others (Borup et al., 2012).

Borup et al. (2012) used semistructured interviews that resulted in many students commenting that they felt the instructor and peers were more real. Overall Borup et al. found that the use of video did increase community feeling and social presence in the courses. From an instructional design perspective, Borup et al. noted that students may

need to be required to comment on others' videos, or students may feel that no one is watching them. The finding that video made the experience more real for students is important to the findings in this doctoral study, where students discussed having a pretend feeling and wanting to be part of a real thing.

In another study involving student-created video, Borup, West, and Graham (2013) studied the use of asynchronous video in online courses through the narrative analysis of four cases involving individual students. Each student had a different characteristic that Borup et al., (2013) wished to explore how video use would influence their online communication. The characteristics were an extrovert, an English language learner, an introvert, and a student with low self-regulation (Borup et al., 2013). Using Voicethread, the instructor would start with a video post to introduce the topic and each student would submit video comments (Borup et al., 2013).

Borup et al. found the extrovert did not experience a huge difference using videos, but did enjoy the introduction videos and preferred creating videos to writing. The introvert also preferred creating the videos, because it helped her build a social presence that she was unable to build face-to-face in courses (Borup et al., 2013). The English language learner found it more challenging because of her low fluency and technology skills (Borup et al., 2013). Finally, the low self-regulation learner felt the video feedback helped keep her motivated, and she felt more connected to her peers (Borup et al., 2013). Borup et al. found that the inability for threaded discussions in Voicethread along with only requiring one comment of each student impacted perceptions. It appears that overall video use increased the connection between instructors and students and students with

each other (Borup et al., 2013). The ELL student's low technology efficacy is important to remember.

In another study, Lyons, Reysen, and Pierce (2012) found a correlation between low technology efficacy and lower perceived learning when videos included images of the instructor. It is important to assess student's technology skills and provide training to mitigate any potential negative consequences of technology use. In the recommendations for this doctoral study, the inclusion of training is important for the adoption of any technology tools.

Using a qualitative case study approach Pinsk, Curran, Poirier, and Coulson (2014) explored students' use of self-created videos in discussion forum posts to determine the effect they had on social presence. Five students agreed to participate by using the college's video creation and hosting tool, Kaltura, for discussion posts and complete an interview about their experience (Pinsk et al., 2014). The instructor provided training for the students on how to use the tool, which they all found extremely easy to learn (Pinsk et al., 2014). Pinsk et al. found three major themes, course engagement, projection of self, and connection to other members of the class and instructor.

Students using video were highly engaged in the discussions, described feeling as if they were in a real class, and described feeling connected to the other students and the instructor (Pinsk et al., 2014). Pinsk et al. mentioned one of the most significant comments from a student involved feeling present in the class, "She stated that she "was" physically present" (p. 272). The potential for video to help some students feel present

and connected to others in the learning experience is a tremendous benefit for creating a sense of belonging and community.

Literature Review Conclusion

The white paper genre provides a problem-based method to explain to stakeholders why they need to address low online course completion rates while providing tangible research-based solutions. The white paper allowed me to make multiple recommendations to address the problem based on the research results of the study, the theories of online adult student persistence and student interaction, and the current literature on orientations for online programs and video technology use.

The recommendation to create an online orientation that includes a community space for the academic disciplines addresses each theme of the research results, interaction, sense of belonging, support, and educational values, as demonstrated by the literature reviewed. Integrating asynchronous video in both the orientation and in online courses will also address the results of the research, by helping students feel more connected to instructors and other students.

<center>**Project Description: Implementation**</center>

One of the benefits of completing a project study as part of the Walden Ed.D. program is the research completed has resulted in a tangible solution in the form of a white paper report that provides a call to action (Appendix A). Implementation of the project includes a process for disseminating the white paper to the key stakeholders at FCC and steps to encourage a call to action to begin implementing recommendations made in the white paper. This section outlines the needed resources and supports, the

barriers and potential solutions to the barriers, an implementation timeline, and role and responsibilities to properly implement the project.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

Along with existing support, resources are needed to disseminate the white paper properly and for the institution to take action on the recommendations presented. The existing supports for implementing the project is the online distance learning coordinator and the vice president for academic affairs, who have both been supportive and interested in the results of this study.

Resources needed for disseminating the white paper include materials, time, additional faculty and staff support, and a venue. Materials needed include paper and copy machine to provide the audience with a copy of the white paper. Time is a resource in multiple ways; I need to have the time to travel and present the paper, and I need the college to provide the time in their schedule. Faculty and staff need to attend and a space will be needed to present. Resources for implementing the recommendations proposed in the white paper include personnel, time, and technology. Personnel are always an expensive resource, whether hiring someone new or having an existing person carry out the recommendations, it will cost money through that person's time.

Potential Barriers

Barriers for disseminating the white paper include needing the time and a venue to present the paper to the college stakeholders. Ideally, the content of the paper and recommendations should be presented to all administrators, online teaching faculty, and professional staff who work with online students. It can be difficult to find a time that is

conducive for all of the stakeholders. Additionally, I need to travel to present the findings in person, restricting the option for multiple face-to-face presentations. One potential solution is to provide a mixed approach with a face-to-face presentation and to create an asynchronous video presentation of the paper. I would present in person to those who could attend, and follow-up with a link via email to a video screencast of me presenting the paper for those who could not attend.

One of the most likely barriers for implementing the recommendations proposed in the white paper will be funding the personnel. In recent years, the college has experienced enrollment and budget declines that resulted in the elimination of some positions. Adding staff or adding duties to existing staff may be a very real barrier. Potential solutions include reaching out to SUNY system for possible support and seeking out grant funding to cover the personnel cost. Grants that could be explored include the SUNY Innovative Instruction Technology Grants (IITG) and High Needs grants.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

The white paper will be presented in a meeting of FCC key stakeholders just prior to the start of the fall 2015 semester. I will request time during the annual opening day meeting held the day prior to the semester officially beginning. Opening day is an ideal time because most of the invitees are required to attend on this day. I will coordinate the presentation with the distance learning coordinator once Walden University officially approves this doctoral study. Invitees will include the vice president of academic affairs, the vice president of student services, the distance learning coordinator, the academic

department chairs, the online teaching faculty, student service representatives, and the directors of the college offices. At the conclusion of the white paper presentation, I will offer to consult further on the implementation of the recommendations with additional follow-up meetings if the stakeholders so desire.

Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others

As the student researcher, I am ultimately responsible for the implementation of the project by presenting the white paper to the relevant stakeholders. Since I am not an employee of FCC, I need others to assist me in the implementation. The distance learning coordinator and vice president of academic affairs roles are to secure the time and location for the presentation of the white paper, communicate that information to the other stakeholders. Previous conversations with the stakeholders indicate that they expect me to provide them with the white paper project and present a summary. They do not expect me to secure the space, invite the other stakeholder to attend, or provide any other consults.

<center>**Project Evaluation**</center>

One of the most important steps in implementing any project is developing a plan for how you will evaluate its effectiveness. For the white paper project created for this doctoral study, I will use Kirkpatrick's four levels for evaluating training (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2007). While the white paper itself is not a training program, the purpose of the paper is to inform the stakeholders of the problem, research, and solution; therefore, it makes sense to evaluate it using a method aligned with that purpose.

The evaluation of the white paper project will be goal-based. Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2007) described four levels of evaluation, which can be used to design evaluations of training programs. Each level provides a different lens for which the program designer can use to align the goals of the program with an effective evaluation. Level 1 evaluates the participants satisfaction with the training, level 2 evaluates the learning that occurs for the participants, level 3 evaluates changes in behavior that result from the training, and level 4 evaluates the results of the training (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2007). Not all levels or aspects of each level apply to every training program, but when compared to the goals of the program it provides a useful lens.

According to Caffarella (2002a), goal (or objective) based evaluation is one of the most common approaches. Basing the evaluation on the goals of the white paper project will tell me if the white paper was successful in communicating the results of this study. It is also common to combine approaches, such as objective-based evaluations with the four levels of evaluation (Caffarella, 2002a). Combining approaches will address other facets of the white paper project, such as the implementation of the project to determine a complete picture of the effectiveness.

The goals of the white paper project were: to help FCC understand the problem and the significance of the problem for their local area; to inform FCC of the theory, research, and practices that relate to the problem; and to provide recommendations on how to address the problem based on the research results, literature, and theory. The ultimate goal of the project is to influence changes to the online program that will then increase the rate of online course completion, through increasing adult students' sense of

school community. I based the goals of this evaluation on the four levels of evaluation and map back to the white paper project goals. The first goal is to determine if the dissemination of the white paper was done in a satisfactory manner for the participants. The second goal is to determine if the participants perceive that they have learned the content of the goals of the white paper project previously outlined. The third goal is to determine if the project changed behaviors. The last goal is to determine if the ultimate goal, the result of an increase in a sense of school community and persistence occurred.

I can evaluate level 1 (reaction) using a short survey of the participants reaction to the presentation of the white paper. Since these are goals and not specific measurable learning objectives, level 2 (learning) can also be addressed through a short survey of the participants asking if they perceive that they learned about the problem, the significance of the problem, the theory, research, and practice that relate to the problem, and the recommended solutions. One week after the white paper dissemination, I will email one single electronic survey to all participants (Appendix J). The week delay is to provide additional time for participants to read the entire white paper.

Evaluating levels 3 and 4 will need to take place well after I disseminate the white paper project. Level 3 is about evaluating changes in behavior from the project, and level 4 is the ultimate results. To evaluate behavior, I will need to observe if the institution implements any of the recommendations over time. I will have discussions with the key stakeholder six months after I have presented the project. Likewise, to evaluate the ultimate goal of the project, the result of an increase in persistence, I will have discussions with the key stakeholders one year after they implement any changes. Ideally,

additional research could be done to confirm results of changes if any are implemented, which is beyond the scope of this study.

The key stakeholders of the white paper project evaluation are the vice president of academic affairs, the vice president of student services, the distance learning coordinator, the academic department chairs, the online teaching faculty, student service representatives, and the directors of the college offices. However, the evaluation of the ultimate goal of this project is to influence changes to the online program that will then increase the rate of online course completion, through increasing adult students' sense of school community. In that regard, the stakeholders are also the students and the community at large, which has larger implications for social change.

Project Implications Including Social Change

Local Community

This doctoral research study led to a white paper project that recommended the creation of an online orientation and community space, the adoption of asynchronous video technology, and hiring of a curriculum instructional designer to aid in the development of a sense of school community. The research and theory reviewed in this white paper project have shown a connection between community and completion of online courses. The implications of the white paper project at the local level includes an increased awareness by the faculty, staff, and administrators of the college that the problem exists, the research and theory on the problem and solutions, and clear recommendations for how to address the problem. The implementation of the recommendations has the potential to lead to positive social change by helping adult

students have a greater sense of school community and increase their chances of successfully completing online courses.

Far-Reaching

The white paper project developed in this study is specific to the local community. However, the sharing of the white paper may have wider implications, as an appendix to this doctoral study. Other researchers may benefit from learning about how the problem of low online course completion was researched and addressed within the context of the local setting. On a larger statewide level, the white paper can be shared with other community colleges in the state system to spark ideas about how to approach their completion challenges, potentially impacting other communities.

Conclusion

This section described the resultant white paper project from a qualitative case study on low online course completion rates at a small, rural community college. The development of the white paper project was informed by the four themes that emerged from the study, the composite persistence model (Rovai, 2003), student involvement theory (Astin, 1999), and a review of the literature on white papers, online orientations, and asynchronous video. I discussed the implementation, evaluation, and implications of the project. The final section of this doctoral study will serve as an overall reflection and conclusion of the project, as well as what I have learned from this journey.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

Reflection of lived experiences is the heart and soul of adult learning. Helping adults learn to critically reflect on their experiences is a concept seen in the works of many prominent adult learner theorists such as Brookfield (1987), Dewey (1938), Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2012), and Mezirow (1997), just to name a few. Schon (1989) further addressed reflection through the lens of practice. Through the doctoral experience, I have become a more reflective practitioner and scholar. In this final section of my doctoral study, I will look back and reflect on the development of the white paper project, the entire doctoral study, and my learning and growth from the experience. I conclude with recommendations for future research.

Project Strengths

The problem I addressed in this study was the low course completion rates in online general education courses at a small community college. The purpose of this research study was to understand how students' experiences and perceptions of a sense of school community contribute to their ability to complete online general education courses. This doctoral study research led to a white paper project as the solution to the problem. The white paper included an overview of the problem, the research study methods and results, and the recommendations for solving the problem at the local level. The major recommendations were the creation of an online orientation and community space and the adoption of asynchronous video technology. I also recommended hiring an online curriculum instructional designer to support the orientation and community space

and video technology recommendations. The development of a white paper project to address the problem and results of the research at the local level had several strengths.

The white paper provides a way to address the complexity of the problem and solutions, rather than one aspect. Online course completion for adult learners is a complex issue that has multiple external and internal factors that can contribute to completion (Rovai, 2003). The aim of this study was to look at internal factors after admissions, specifically a sense of school community. Even though I narrowed the focus, the complexity of the problem remains.

A white paper project allowed me to make multiple recommendations for addressing the issues based on the interviews with the students and the theories and research on the topic. A different project would not have met the multiple needs that emerged from the study. For example, a singular curriculum development project to develop an orientation would not have addressed the need for students to have additional ways of interacting in their courses by using video, nor would it have addressed the recommendation of hiring an online curriculum instructional designer.

An additional strength of the white paper project is it provides academic, research-based context for the stakeholders to base decision-making (Juricek, 2009; Stelzner, 2007). The recommendations in the white paper were based on the academic research that precedes them. The paper outlines the literature, theories, and research methods that I used to investigate the problem in the study. Using research-based investigative papers are an ideal approach for an academic audience. The white paper

also includes an executive summary that is useful for those stakeholders who do not have the time to read the entire white paper.

The white paper also provides specific guidance on how to approach the online orientation and community space and the adoption of asynchronous video. White papers provide a starting point from which the stakeholders can take immediate action (Powell, 2012). There is a clear outline of the content and pedagogy needed for the orientation and community space. The video recommendation includes considerations for how to pick and adopt a tool. The paper provides a background on the concept of school community that is not available through the larger state system. The white paper is a teaching tool and serves to educate while providing solutions to the problem.

<center>**Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations**</center>

While the project has several strengths, some limitations exist. For the white paper to be successful, the stakeholders need to take action to address the problem. Since I am not an employee of the college, I may not be aware of various institutional issues or processes that could prevent the stakeholders from implementing the recommendations. For example, resources and funding may be an issue. The development of the online orientation will take people and time to complete. Once it is developed, it will require facilitation, monitoring, and updating on a regular basis.

Integrating video use will also require initial and sustained resources. Since low technology efficacy can counteract the positive effects of using technology, training needs to be developed to assist faculty, staff, and students utilize the technology (Lyons, Reysen, & Pierce, 2012). One way to remediate the resource issue is to follow up with

the stakeholders and offer assistance. While this doctoral study will be complete, I will act upon the long-term evaluation plan outlined within it and offer my professional assistance as a director of online curriculum and instructional design to carry out the recommendations.

The white paper also reports on one semester of student interviews. It is a snapshot in time of a small sample size of students who agreed to participate. Having a small sample and not being able to generalize beyond the local site is common for qualitative case studies (Merriam, 2009). However, it does limit the potential knowledge gained. Students that agreed to participate may be predisposed to feeling negative or positive about online learning. A possible remediation is to continue further research at FCC on the topic with additional students or using additional methods.

An orientation and community space is required to address the problem, and the addition of video will make a substantial impact based on the research results and literature. Another way to address the problem is to structure online more tightly with programs and have students take courses in a cohort (Rovai et al., 2005). Cohorts create an opportunity for community to develop because students have more time to build relationships if they see each other in multiple courses semester to semester. The benefits of cohorts emerged with one participant who talked about how much easier it is to connect with the students they have had in other classes. They tend to form a cohort of their own when it does happen, but it is by chance rather than design. A potential problem with the cohort approach is it is more challenging for a community college where general

education courses are a large part of any degree. A complete reworking of curriculum and online offerings would need to occur to make cohorts possible.

A possible alternative approach to the problem of low online course completion could be defining the problem using the lens of classroom community. Even though the focus of this study was on the larger sense of school community, at times students described a lack of instructor presence in the classroom. The problem could be further investigated using a classroom community lens. An alternative solution to address a lack of instructor presence would be to create a training program for faculty on how to increase their online instructor presence.

Scholarship

As can be expected from a doctoral program, I learned the methods and techniques used for completing a research study. I understand how to search and analyze literature, how to create interview protocols, how to collect and analyze the data, and how to communicate the results. However, I learned much more than the procedural steps to complete research.

I learned the importance of letting the problem and the context drive the methods. When I first approached exploring possible study topics and approaches, I was keen on using quantitative methods for my research. I have a math and science background, so I often think of data as numbers and statistics. However, the problem and lens that I wanted to use called for a more personal approach to research. I learned there is value in all methods when aligned with the purpose of the study.

Once the research questions and methodology have been defined, the process of research takes time. One of the most valuable lessons I have learned about scholarship is to allow time for ideas and thoughts to emerge. It is an iterative process of exploring, thinking, and often redefining how to approach a topic. Scholarship involves keeping an open mind and looking for multiple perspectives and possibilities. It is about seeking out a better understanding of the world, and learning how we make meaning of everyday phenomena.

Project Development and Evaluation

The development of this doctoral study project as a white paper emerged from the results of the research study. As with scholarship and the importance of letting the methodology emerge from the problem, project development and evaluation needs to build from the results of the research. The research results of this study directly influenced the decision to create a white paper. While not all project developers based their work on a research study, they typically use needs assessment to gather data (Caffarella, 2002b). The research or needs assessment guides the goals and objectives of the project. It is also important to map your goals and objectives to a clear evaluation plan to determine the success of the project. I learned that project development is a journey, a process, an experience to embrace, not just a task to accomplish or a deadline to meet.

Leadership and Change

Through the doctoral project, I am learning to see myself as a leader in online education. Being a leader is about informed decision-making that leads to positive change

within an organization. Morrison (2013) described leadership as providing the vision and strategy for change, where management makes the change happen from an operational standpoint. I exhibited leadership through this doctoral study. The white paper project outlined a clear vision and strategy for how FCC can change their online program to help increase a sense of school community and course completion rates. The research study informed the decision-making process of recommending the online orientation and video technology adoption. When implemented, the recommendations will lead to positive social change. I learned that I am an expert and a leader in adult learning in the online environment, and from my knowledge, experience, and scholarship, I can impact change.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

I began this journey as a practitioner with a master's degree in adult education and very little research experience. I would not have described myself as a scholar, as my practice decisions were often anecdotal or drew from my own experiences as an adult learner. As I progressed through the decision-making progress for my study topic through to the methodology, I began to see myself as a researcher and not just practitioner. I was nervous about completing a qualitative study at first because I have always been a numbers person. However, I realized that the qualitative tradition was a good fit for the research problem and questions I had, and matched up with my constructivist educational philosophy. I have since come to appreciate both traditions and can see myself drawing from either in the future, depending on the need of the topic I am researching. I would not have been as confident about attempting research if it were not for this experience. In fact, I have already applied my confidence in my professional life. I have written grant

proposals and IRB applications to support grant-funded research that I hope to complete during the next year.

Finally, I have begun to enjoy scholarship. On my desk, within close reach, is a list of research topics and writings to explore when this doctoral journey is complete. As a student, it can be hard to think beyond the discrete steps of the process that need to be completed; however, during the data collection and analysis phase of this project, I began to appreciate the process and see myself as a scholar. It was fascinating to delve into the experiences of the participants, and from those interactions, develop an informed plan for solving a research problem.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

I have always seen myself as a practitioner more than a scholar. As I complete the doctoral project that provided an opportunity to do both, I know scholarship has helped me become a better practitioner. I find that I question practice in ways I did not previously. I look at everyday practices and now ask what the research is behind the practice. Being able to blend both practice and research is something that I need to do as an educational administrator.

I would describe this change as becoming a more reflective practitioner. Schon (1989) described "knowing-in-practice" as someone who can "surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice" (p. 6) and through that reflection make new meaning. While I have learned a great deal, I have also learned to question what I do and not accept everything as an absolute truth. Working at an institution with a large-scale online program using a

master-model course design approach requires consistency in course design. The master course approach to online learning is a specialized practiced, which I am now examining the fundamental reasoning of why this practice exists. I would like to learn more about the research behind the practice, if there is evidence that it impacts learning, and if it benefits practice. It is through examples such as this one that I show reflective practice in action.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

When thinking about myself as a project developer the first word that comes to mind is capable. I am a certified program planner and develop projects for adult learners in higher education regularly. In my current role, I develop curriculum and training projects related to the instructional design of online courses. Having the opportunity to create a white paper project was a new and valuable process for me professionally. I can directly apply what I learned in my project study to my work in online curriculum and instructional design. The content is relevant to what I do, and the ability to communicate in an academic style is equally important. I need to communicate with a wide range of faculty with diverse backgrounds and perspectives about instructional design.

The experience of developing a white paper for this project study directly contributes to my ability to write future white papers. The development of the white paper has also increased my confidence in my capability to develop projects that are different from ones I am accustomed to developing. By successfully completing the process of researching a problem and developing a white paper project to solve the problem, I know that I can easily tackle any problem that I may encounter in my work.

The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

This doctoral research study led to a white paper project that recommended the creation of an online orientation and community space, the adoption of asynchronous video technology, and the hiring of a curriculum instructional designer to aid in the development of a sense of school community. The research and theory reviewed in this study have shown that online course completion is an issue in the local setting and beyond. I have provided a clear connection between a sense of school community and completion of online courses. The white paper project that emerged from this study has the potential to support students, an institution, and the local community with growth.

By helping online students feel connected to the institution, faculty, and each other, this project can help FCC increase the online course completion rates for adult students. An increase in adult students completing courses will have economic implications for an institution underfunded by the state, during a time when enrollment is declining. Additionally, demographics of the local community are changing, with a growing adult population. The local area is rural and economically disadvantaged. The ability to serve the local adult population more effectively will help the students meet their goals for higher education and career advancement. A more educated community and workforce will support economic growth of the community and create informed citizens, leading to a higher quality of life for the community.

Care must be taken in trying to apply the results of a small qualitative case study to a larger educational context. The topic is a complex one that is integrally tied to the context within which it exists. However, while the specific solutions may be contextually

unique, the problem of low online course completion rates is a widespread issue that is not unique to FCC. On a larger statewide level, this research can be shared with other community colleges in the SUNY system to spark ideas about how to approach their completion challenges, potentially impacting other communities. This study can have a wider social change impact through informing my future research on the topic of online completion and a sense of school community, as well as that of other researchers. I will seek out opportunities to present on the knowledge gained from this study in order to share it more widely with those who could contribute to positive social change in their communities.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

One of the most challenging parts of this study for me is not knowing if the proposed changes will have the desired impact on the local research site. The best way to find out is to complete future research to determine the actual impact and applicability to the proposed changes. I will propose a study of the implementation of the orientation and the inclusion of video technology to assess if it affected change on a sense of school community and course completion rates.

This study can be applied to the education field by expanding the current use of orientations to include a student life cycle approach. Orientation can be a place for students to stay current with institutional changes to policy or technology, as well as provide a consistent resource and support space. They may need a new name to encompass all that they can represent, or the term orientation can be looked at as part of

larger whole; however, the idea that online adult learners need more than one introduction to being an online learner is an important one.

The school community concept needs further exploration in the field of adult online learning. The theory and few studies on the concept, combined with this research study seem to confirm that it is a concept that needs to be explored further with adult learners. Time is a major issue for adults, but connections at the institutional level need to be explored for additional ways to enhance community. An orientation and video technology will assist this specific setting; however, are there broader approaches that can occur across institutions? Are there solutions for a sense of school community that would also help create a sense of classroom community, or are the solutions mutually exclusive? Research on school community needs to expand further using a variety of research methods.

Moving forward, I want to continue to research the school community concept and how it relates to online course completion more broadly. In addition to researching the impact of the changes at FCC, I would like to propose a quantitative study to gain a larger more generalizable view on the concept. Research could expand to other community colleges in the state system or within some of the four-year comprehensive colleges that offer online courses.

Conclusion

Much of this section represents my growth and development from completing this doctoral study. At the same time, it highlights the process and product of developing a solution to a very real and critical problem in online adult higher education. Locally and

nationally online course completion rates need improvement. This study explored the adult online completion problem at a small, rural community college through the lens of the school community framework. The study results showed that students did not feel a sense of school community. A lack of interaction, a sense of belonging, support, and educational values emerged as critical themes. Students stressed the importance of having continued access to asynchronous online courses.

As a solution to the problem, the study results, along with research on theories and recent literature led to the development of a white paper project. In the white paper, I concluded that an online orientation with a community space and the adoption of asynchronous video technology will help solve the problem at FCC. I also recommended hiring an online curriculum instructional designer to support these initiatives. They important takeaway for policy and practice is the importance of building connections to students in the online environment.

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Appendix A: The Project White Paper

Community, Completion, and Success: Online Program Recommendations for Adult Learners

Executive Summary

Nationwide, online course completion rates are problematically low. Locally, the rate at NY community colleges is below the national average. The purpose of this paper is to present the findings and recommendations of a doctoral research study of online course completion of general education courses at the Focus Community College (FCC) of this study. The study was completed using a qualitative case study approach with semistructured interviews of nine adult online students. The composite persistence model for adult online students and the sense of school community construct was used as the lens for the study. Theory and research agree that a sense of school community and belonging is important for persistence in the online environment.

This research study asked the questions: How do online students at FCC describe a sense of school community when completing online courses? In what ways do online students perceive a sense of school community as being present at FCC? What aspects of a sense of school community do students at FCC perceive as contributing to successful completion of online courses? Results showed four significant themes: *interaction* is limited in quantity and type; students do not feel *a sense of belonging* or connection; there is a need for clarity of *support* available and a personal feeling of being supported; and students' *educational values* include online remaining convenient, with fully online options available.

These results along with theory and a review of the literature resulted in the following **recommendations**:

1. The creation of an online orientation and community space
2. The adoption and integration of asynchronous video technology
3. The hiring of an online curriculum instructional designer

The Problem

From 2002 to 2012 the number of students taking at least one online course steadily increased, from 1.6 million to 7.1 million (Allen & Seamen, 2014). Community colleges have been supporting the bulk of the online increase. In 2008, over half of the students taking an online course, were adult students at a 2-year public institution (Radford, 2011). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), 13% of the students at FCC enrolled in an online education course (approximately 250 students each semester).

The growth of adult online learning at community colleges has not been problem free. Online course completion rates nationwide have been problematically low (WICHE, 2013). FCC was one of 12 institutions statewide that participated in data collection that showed an average completion rate of 67% in 2010 (Fetzner, 2013). 67% is lower than the national average found by WICHE (2013) in a survey of 225 institutions across the United States and Puerto Rico, which found that the average completion rate in online courses was 78% and for community colleges alone, 73%. In NY, 6.9 million adults do not have a college degree (Open SUNY, 2013). SUNY has acknowledged the need for more resources and a focus on access, success, and completion in online learning, as demonstrated by the creation of Open SUNY.

Importance

• • •

7.1 million students take at least one online course.

• • •

NY average completion rate for online community college courses: 67%
National average for community colleges: 73%

• • •

6.9 million adults in NY do not have a college degree.

• • •

FCC strategic goals of Access, Retention, and Success mirrors the Open SUNY mission of Access, Success, and Completion.

Many of the online courses offered by FCC are general education courses, which are foundational "gateway" courses to most degree programs. Online courses provide a flexible alternative for those with busy lives, especially adult students. Factors that contribute to an adult student's ability to complete online courses are complex, and the context is crucial to understanding the problem. Additionally, not all factors that can contribute to course completion are within the control of an institution. In 2011, FCC updated their strategic goals, with a focus on increasing student access, retention, and success. Students successfully completing online courses will contribute to the overall strategic goals.

The problem of online course completion experienced by FCC is also apparent in the larger educational environment. An extensive literature review was completed to examine if online course completion was indeed a problem. Some online course completion research involves comparing the completion rates of an online course with the equivalent face-to-face course (Ashby, Sandera, & McNary, 2011; Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012; Xu & Jaggars, 2011; Xu & Jaggars, 2013; Zavarella & Ignash, 2009). Other research studies focus on comparing interventions used to combat the problem or to search for factors that can inform solutions (Fetzner, 2013; Jones, 2013; Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009; Nolan, 2013). What they have in common is an acknowledgment that online course completion is a problem in higher education.

Importance

If FCC does not solve this problem, students will continue to drop out of online courses. Potential students may not enroll in online courses based on the experiences of others that have not been successful. Without understanding why students are not successful, it is difficult to address the online course completion problem. Additionally, the county demographic projections show a population growth in the 25 and over age group and a decline in the 24 and under age group (Cornell University, 2011). As the demographics change, providing access to adult students will become more crucial to the institution and community. Community colleges serve an important role in educating the population and producing citizens that can positively contribute to society (Boggs, 2011; Schudde

& Goldrick-Rab, 2015). The open access nature of community colleges creates a welcoming and accessible means for adults to return to college to complete a degree, begin one they were unable to start earlier in life, or study for a career change. Adult students often work full-time, have families, and have other responsibilities that make attending traditional classes difficult (Rovai, 2003). However, if students are unable to complete online courses successfully, then the access and opportunities that a community college education can provide will not matter.

> *County demographic projections show a population growth in the 25 and over age group and a decline in the 24 and under age group.*

School Community Framework

Online courses have unique differences and needs from campus-based courses and understanding the factors that contribute to course completion are important for developing strategies that will assist students persisting (Stanford-Bowers, 2008). In this study, I drew from Rovai's (2003) model of student persistence in online distance education programs, called the composite persistence model. Rovai (2003) developed the CPM for online distance education programs by researching Tinto's (1975) traditional student retention theory and Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of nontraditional student attrition, combining these two theories with research on distance learning for adult students.

The CPM consists of two distinct times in an adult online student's life: prior to admission and after admission. Prior to admission, the CPM includes student characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and academic preparation, as well as student skills, such as computer and information literacy, time management, reading, and writing skills, that students bring with them into college impact their persistence. After admissions, external and internal factors related to persistence exist. External factors include those adult responsibilities that make the adult population of students unique from traditional-aged students, including finances, hours of employment, and family responsibilities. Rovai

drew from Tinto (1975), Bean and Metzner (1985), and Workman and Stenard (1996) for the many internal factors that can contribute to persistence. My study drew from the internal factors that contribute to a sense of community.

A sense of community in the online classroom has been the focus of much research in distance learning (Childress & Spurgin, 2009; Rovai et al., 2004). However, school community, which encompasses interpersonal relationships, identification with school, school climate, learning communities, and a sense of belonging has received much less attention in the distance learning environment (Rovai et al., 2004). Students feeling they are part of a larger community and supported by the institution and others going through the experience is important for successful completion of online courses and programs (Rovai et al., 2004). Rovai, Wighting, and Liu (2005) compared the sense of classroom and school communities between online and on-campus programs and found that online students had a lower sense of school community. A lower sense of belonging or connectedness can lead to a higher dropout rate (Rovai et al., 2005). Given the importance of a sense of school community within the internal factors of Rovai's adult student online persistence model, this study used Rovai's model, focusing on school community as a lens to examine course completion in the online environment.

> *Students feeling they are part of a larger community and supported by the institution and others going through the experience is important for successful completion of online courses and programs (Rovai et al., 2004).*

FCC students primarily take online courses, course by course, not necessarily as part of a cohesive program. Every time students and faculty enter a course, there is a need to rebuild community (Childress & Spurgin, 2009). Building a connection with the institution, faculty, and staff outside the classroom can support students' sense of community beyond the individual course (Childress & Spurgin, 2009; Rovai et al., 2004). Looking at community more widely provided a deeper view of persistence that has not been available.

Purpose and Design

The purpose of this research study was to understand how students' experiences and perceptions of a sense of school community contribute to their ability to complete online general education courses. I used an instrumental case study approach due to the qualitative nature of the purpose and research questions, along with my constructivist paradigm and bounded complex nature of the research setting. The research questions include one central and two subquestions as follows:

- How do online students at FCC describe a sense of school community when completing online courses?
    - In what ways do online students perceive a sense of school community as being present at FCC?
    - What aspects of a sense of school community do students at FCC perceive as contributing to successful completion of online courses?

Open-ended, semistructured individual interviews with nine students was the data collection method. The school community concept from Rovai et al. (2004) provided a framework for the questions and probes. Participant selection was a purposeful, criterion-based sample of students using maximum variation across general education disciplines to make sure that a variety of subject matters was included. All participants consented that they were 18 or over and taking at least one fully online general education course during the fall 2014 semester. The sample represented a wide range of general education disciplines, including basic communication, humanities, social sciences, math, natural sciences, arts, and information management.

Additional demographic information was not specifically asked for as part of this study; however, many participants discussed aspects of their lives during the interviews. Seven of the participants were female, and two were male. Six were taking a full-time course load (over 12-credits), and three were taking a part-time load (under 12-credits). Three identified as working full-time, two part-time, two

as stay-at-home moms, and two did not state if they were currently employed. Five directly identified as being a primary caregiver for children or the elderly.

All participants received an informed consent form prior to participating in the study, describing the background of the study, the voluntary nature of it, any risks or benefits, payments, privacy, and contact information. I obtained IRB approval from Walden University and consent to complete the research from the academic affairs office at FCC.

Results

I transcribed each interview, completed a case analysis of each interview transcript, and followed with cross-case pattern analysis of the interview protocol questions. I coded data using pawing and marking of text, followed by cutting and sorting of quotes or expressions. Through an iterative process, the common codes eventually emerged into four main themes: (a) interaction, (b) sense of belonging, (c) support, and (d) educational values.

Interaction

A significant theme, which emerged from the participants, was surrounding the interactions that they have with students, faculty, and the college as a whole. Interactions are limited in quantity, nature, and type. Student to student interaction online is limited to mainly mandatory graded discussions. Many mentioned that if the discussions were not mandatory, there would be no interaction. Other options available for interacting include email and help forums, but students do not regularly reach out to each other. Some courses have group projects, but they too are limited in their interaction.

For the most part, students' feelings surrounding interactions were not conducive for a sense of school community. When asked how the interactions with students and faculty made them feel some of the words they used were awkward, frustrating, odd, pointless, a struggle, cheated, weird, confusing, and anxious. When asked what a sense of school community looks and feels like, students spoke about things that they felt were missing. They felt that interactions are currently limited, and that impacts the community feeling. Many

cited that same time communication is missing, and there needs to be technology solutions to support building an online community. In general, they feel there needs to be more interaction, more options, and more clarity.

Participants also discussed aspects related to a sense of school community that they felt could impact successful course completion. The ability to share with other students was an important part. They also spoke of how lack of instructor interaction, difficulty in contacting instructors, and technical problems could impact success and grades. When I asked participants how they would approach creating a sense of school community, they focused on increasing interaction with students and faculty and expanding options to meet that need.

Interactions were limited in quantity, nature, and type.

Students described interactions as feeling awkward, frustrating, odd, pointless, a struggle, cheated, weird, confusing, and anxious.

Sense of Belonging

The next dominant theme that emerged was a lack of a sense of belonging. They do not feel they really know each other nor have common goals. There is an impersonal feeling from their interactions that leaves them feeling very indifferent and removed. They discussed not being able to see each other and ways that a sense of belonging is important for a sense of school community. A common comment about other students and faculty was that they "do not know them". Participants gave the same type of response in regards to faculty. They commented that they only know them "virtually".

Others found connecting to be difficult, citing it is hard for some to share thoughts online or gain an understanding without being able to chat easily. It is easier to connect and get to know each other's personalities face-to-face. Some felt it was uncomfortable to talk with students they do not know; however, another found it more comfortable to share her thoughts online. Students felt a

large disconnect with faculty, describing it as impersonal, feeling like a number, feeling cold, or just indifferent. One participant stated that she does not "…feel any strong emotions about them." In general, participants said that the online environment feels removed, detached, impersonal, and pretend. Participants said they do not feel any camaraderie or sense of belonging. They feel alone, not valued, forgotten, invisible, and isolated.

When asked what a sense of school community would look like, participants described a greater sense of belonging. Interactions help to reduce the loneliness feeling of online learning. They said they would know each other better, have common goals, and they could build relationships. Everyone would feel included and like they were part of something. They mentioned fitting in and having a camaraderie feeling. It would not feel isolating, but instead like a big family. They felt that you need to see people in order to connect to them and that there is no school community feeling because they cannot see each other. When asked, they also felt that a sense of belonging was important for successful course completion. Students need to feel connected and involved in a "real thing". It is uncomfortable for some to reach out for help, without feeling connected.

They discussed ways that they feel a greater sense of school community can be created. They mentioned needing opportunities to get to know each other. Some ideas were to include images in profiles, introduction videos/audio, lecture videos/audio, and small group projects. In general, they wanted to have more options and opportunities for interaction in order to create better connections with people.

> *"I do not know them."*
>
> *Students need to feel connected and involved in a "real thing".*

Support

The third theme that emerged from the research concerned how students perceived support. Support can be actual offerings from the institution, as well as feelings from having relationships with people. They discussed how they describe it currently, what it would be like if they had a greater sense of school community, how support relates to completion, and what they felt was needed to feel more supported.

In general, students have a greater feeling of support when they take on-campus classes. One student who took both online and on-campus courses used the on-campus tutoring center for her online English course. Even though there is online tutoring available, most of the participants were not aware of the option, and those that were, had not used it yet. In addition to not knowing what support was available, some students felt that in the online environment, faculty could not see them struggling. The lack of clarity about available resources, combined with the feeling of disconnection, can leave some students feeling unsupported.

Participants felt that a support system is crucial for success. One student commented, "I guess I need support personally from other people to help get me through." and "A greater sense of community would help build that support." Another student mentioned that classmates could be a great resource, "a living resource" that can really help each other. In contrast, they felt they had more support from others when they were on campus. Another support related item that emerged was time management. Participants felt that time management skills are needed for successful completion of courses. Many mentioned working in addition to attending school and that adults were extremely busy. One participant stated "I feel like I am struggling getting my homework done on time all the time." Another mentioned that sometimes faculty will assign due dates within a day, which can be difficult for busy adults. It can make it very overwhelming, which also increases stress levels.

Participants also discussed what they thought would be needed in regards to support and a sense of school community. Feeling like there is a support system is something they valued. Having that feeling would reduce some of the stress of

being an online adult student. The actual institutional supports are important, but merely having them is not enough; they need to be clearly communicated and easy to access. Several students mentioned needing an orientation for online courses. There was also a sense that communication needed improvement. Specifically, awareness of what is expected, how to use technology, strategies to be successful, sharing of campus events and activities, and how to get support.

Important Considerations

• • •

Convenience is the main draw for an adult.

• • •

Students want more interaction, but also had concern for anything that would require face-to-face or synchronous sessions.

• • •

Having fully online courses is an important option.

Educational Values

The last theme that emerged from the interviews is educational values. Values involved concerns they had for how to create a sense of school community. They emerged from the students when they thought about creating a sense of school community and as their final thoughts. Participants discussed the values of time, commitment, and asynchronous nature of online courses.

One aspect centered on valuing commitment. Students mentioned that a sense of school community requires a commitment and time to develop. Several students stated that there is no sense of school community from online courses for them. "I guess in a way I don't feel overly a part of the college. I am not there. I'm basically just signing into a class" (Participant 8). Participant 3 explained that the community feeling could get lost online, because people do not have a sense of commitment that you have in other community environments. It is common to have initial icebreaker discussions where

students introduce themselves. However, students did not feel that was enough time commitment to build a community feeling. For a sense of school community to build, it would require a longer commitment of time and expansion beyond one individual class.

Above all, students consistently valued asynchronous online courses for their overall fit. After students spent much of the interviews talking about what was missing in the online environment, they were very clear to note the importance of having fully online courses as an option. Students used the word grateful to describe how they felt about having online courses. Some requested that more courses be available online. Online courses provide balance, options, and an opportunity to work on their own time. Participants said the convenience factor is one of the main draws for an adult. Many said online was the only way they could take courses, because online classes fit into their busy schedules. Convenience also came up when talking about adding more interactive options. They want more interaction, but also had concern for anything that would require face-to-face or synchronous sessions. They do not want to lose the convenience factor.

A few participants talked about the importance of asking students for their input, designing for student's goals, and creating solutions from student feedback. This research study is meeting that need. The values provide important insights when trying to build a greater sense of school community. Students mentioned how appreciative they were to see someone research the issue. There needs to be enough time and commitment for school community to develop and the convenience factor of fully online courses must stay intact. Students valued the access online courses provide to higher education, while acknowledging that there is room for improvement.

Recommendations

In addition to the themes from the results of the research, theories on adult student persistence in distance learning and student involvement, along with a current review of the literature inform the recommendations for the online

program. Two major recommendations include the creation of an online orientation space that includes a community area for the academic disciplines and the integration of asynchronous video. The final recommendation is the addition of an online curriculum instructional designer. I have presented the recommendations here in order of priority.

Online Orientation and Community Space
Why an orientation/community space?

An online orientation and community space is the most logical recommendation based on the results of this study, theory, and current research. FCC does not currently have an orientation and community space to serve this need. An orientation and community space will address the theme of interaction by providing a risk-free venue for students to interact with each other and faculty. The increased interaction will also increase a sense of belonging and connection to students, faculty, and the institution, increasing student's identification with the institution and facilitating the building of interpersonal relationships. Students will learn about college-provided support services while building connections to others who can be supportive. Additionally, students will learn the skills and strategies needed to be successful online learners.

According to Rovai's (2003) CPM orientation programs can provide consistency and clarity of online programs, policies, and procedures; identification with the school; interpersonal relationships; and ready access to support services. A review of the literature confirmed that orientation programs are an excellent vehicle for helping students build a connection to the institution, interact with students and faculty, learn about the supports and resources available, and learn the skills needed to be successful online (Britto & Rush, 2013; Cho, 2012; Dixon et al., 2012; Tutty & Ratliff, 2012; Wozinak, Pizzica, & Mahoney, 2012). Additionally, they can also improve persistence, which was the ultimate goal of this study (Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Jones, 2013; Rice, Rojjanasrirat, & Trachsel, 2013). In order for students to have a sense of school community, it is important that students have a regular way to connect to others outside of the online classroom.

Based on their research Wozniak, Pizzica, and Mahony (2012) recommend having orientation extend over time, embedding orientation in academic disciplines, and having a strong instructor presence in the orientation. Spurgin and Childress (2009) studied the difference between community in the classroom versus within the wider academic disciplines. They found a lack of wider community, and recommended the building of online discipline-based communities in conjunction with online orientations, while keeping the time constraints of students in mind (Spurgin & Childress, 2009). These recommendations along with the results of the study, which showed a need to build a sense of school community, contribute to the recommendation that the orientation space includes a community space with opportunities for students to interact with students and faculty in similar disciplines.

Staff should also use the community space to address some of the communication problems that adult students in the study identified. Some students felt isolated by the communication they received from the college. They did not identify with the messages coming from email, as most emails concerning student involvement addressed the younger traditional on-campus population. Target communications to adult learners to better engage them in things that matter to them through the orientation and community space. Surveys students to find out what they want or need, and then have staff create online opportunities for online adult learners to participate in the institution.

Create incentives for faculty and students to participate, and task staff with holding online events and discussion opportunities to bring students and faculty together. According to Astin (1999) student involvement positively influences persistence. Involve students by creating leadership roles for them to develop and sustain the orientation and community space. In addition to leadership roles in the community space, encourage students and faculty to develop online clubs around disciplines or special interests, provide or extend community service opportunities, and create an online student advisory group. These types of activities can be done at a distance, using online tools.

Orientation and Community Space Content

At minimum, the orientation content needs to include:

- An introduction to online learning with a readiness assessment
- An introduction to the college, including a virtual tour, student videos, and introduction to key faculty and staff (i.e. administrators, online coordinators, student services, online teaching faculty, and department chairs)
- Information about all online courses and programs and campus-based courses and programs
- Online success strategies including time management strategies, academic integrity, communication in the online environment, interacting online, and managing group work
- Support services and college offices clearly articulated, contextualized, and easy to access (i.e. help desk, academic tutoring, writing support, library, counseling and advisement, career services, financial aid, registrar, bursar, bookstore, academic affairs, student clubs, student senate)
- Technology training to include links to SUNY provided technology training for the LMS and training on video technology and other technologies not available through SUNY system
- Information about how to participate in the community space, including leadership opportunities

Orientation and Community Space Design

The design of the orientation and community space is extremely important if it is to address the results of this research study.

The space needs to be:

- Asynchronous and fully online
- A consistent resource - students should never lose access to the space, and they should be encouraged and invited to return often

- Facilitated by online learning faculty and staff to support building connections
- Required of all online students
- Designed with goals, objectives, activities, and assessments
- Competency-based (meets or dos not meet) allowing students to continue until mastery, and result in a badge or completion certificate
- Highly interactive, incorporate video, student perspectives, virtual tours, practice common course activities, and include interactions with students and faculty
- Connected to a community space that is within the LMS or a link to an external space to build a community of practice around specific disciplines.
- Designed to provide each department within the college space to share relevant information, events, and activities with students

Asynchronous Video

One of the overwhelming research results was students felt the need to see people in order to connect to them. Some even stated that there is no school community feeling because they cannot see each other. Student recommendations for building a sense of school community included finding ways for students to see and hear each other and faculty, without needing to add synchronous or face-to-face sessions. FCC should incorporate video into the orientation and community space, as well as all online courses.

According to Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement, interactions are quantitative and qualitative in nature. Asynchronous video technology can increase the quantity and quality of interactions, build a stronger sense of belonging and connectedness, and support learning. Easy to use video technology, with minor time investments to learn, can provide more opportunities for interaction, involvement, and engagement. Video can be used in the classroom, in orientation, and other online college environments.

A review of the literature showed that instructor generated video content (Draus, Curran, & Trempus, 2014; Kim, Kwona, & Cho, 2011; Miller & Redman, 2010; Moore & Filling, 2012; Silva, 2012) and student- produced content (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Borup, West, & Graham, 2013; Griffiths & Graham, 2010; Pinsk, Curran, Poirier, & Coulson, 2014) does indeed increase interactions and feelings of being connected to other students and faculty in the online environment.

Videos incorporated into the orientation and course instruction encourage active, engaging learning in a variety of ways. The first most common approach is to create or curate video content that students must respond to in some way (Sherer & Shea, 2011). Instructors can also use video to provide feedback to students on writing assignments or other projects (see Moore & Filling, 2012; Silva, 2012). A variation on the feedback approach that more actively involves students is to have them curate and share video content or they can work individually or collaboratively to find and analyze videos on a specific topic (Sherer & Shea, 2011). Another approach is to have students create videos individually or as a team for assignments, projects, or online discussions (Sherer & Shea, 2011). The instructional design options for integrating video are endless.

How to begin?
Multiple options exist for video technology available from openly available free services such as YouTube, to password protected secure systems such as Kaltura and Ensemble.

To adopt video technology the following must occur:

- Choose a video hosting provider. Weigh the benefit versus cost of using secure video hosting site over free options
- Choose a video recording option. Some hosting providers come with the technology needed to create and host the videos (Kaltura), where others, such as YouTube would require the use of PC software (ex. Windows Movie Maker; iMovie) to record the video. Ease of use should be the priority

- Choose a screen capture software that allows faculty and staff to create quick instructional how-to videos. As with hosting providers, free and fee-based options exist
- Provide training for faculty, staff, and students to learn how to use the chosen video technology
- Provide training for faculty and orientation staff on pedagogical approaches to using video in instruction
- Provide training on accessibility. All technologies and content created with the technologies must meet section 508 accessibility standards.
- Students and faculty need webcams , mobile devices, or smartphones that allow them to record video; webcams are inexpensive and can be incorporated into course materials or provided to students as part of their technology fee
- Provide user support services for faculty, staff, and students to troubleshoot video technology problems
- Work with the campus technology office for potential security and authentication issues

Addition of an Online Curriculum Instructional Designer

In addition to the creation of an online orientation and community space and the integration of video technology, I recommend hiring of an online curriculum instructional designer. An online curriculum instructional designer is someone who is an expert in planning, designing, and developing approaches to curriculum and individual courses in a way that takes advantage of the online modality. They have knowledge and experience of learning theories and apply those theories to the design of the curriculum and courses. While not a technologist, they do have the skills and knowledge of the technologies used in the online environment. They look holistically at instruction, from a student point of view. If funding is an issue for the position, grants could be explored, such as the SUNY Innovative Instruction Technology Grants (IITG) and High Needs grants, or the position can start as a part-time line and expand to full-time as the program grows. However, the importance of implementing the online orientation and community space, and the integration of video technology cannot be understated and a curriculum instructional designer is critical.

The Role of an Online Curriculum Instructional Designer

An online curriculum instructional designer has the expertise to carry out the recommendations of this study. The primary role of the position is to develop and maintain the orientation and community space and to facilitate the adoption and training of asynchronous video technology. An experienced curriculum instructional designer can also address other related findings from this study. The position would support the work of the online coordinator who already has a full load administering the program.

Every institutional practice and policy should be examined in relation to the time that students need to invest in those endeavors relative to their academic and social needs (Astin, 1999). Efficiency and clarity within practices, policies, and processes are essential for the online adult learner. An expert in online curriculum and the needs of adult learners could complete a thorough review of college services and offices, ensuring college policies and practices are not barriers to online adult students' ability to successfully complete courses.

Students in this study expressed the desire to have more online course options. A person who specializes in curriculum design could engage with faculty in curriculum mapping to identify potential gaps in the online course offerings. Then as new courses come online, the curriculum instructional designer could consult with faculty on best practices for online course design that encourages interaction and feelings of community. Additional online offerings, along with the other recommendations, will better enable adult students to attend FCC online and complete a college degree.

Online Program Recommendations

1. Create an online orientation and community space

2. Adopt and integrate asynchronous video technology

3. Hire an online curriculum instructional designer

Closing Thoughts

The SUNY Chancellor's Open SUNY initiative has caused institutions across the state to look closely at their online programs. Wave one of the initiative saw eight programs designated as Open SUNY + degrees, and with wave two that number grew to 64 (Open SUNY, 2015). As more SUNY institutions invest in online courses and programs, they will directly compete for the local adult learner population. If FCC does not invest in their online program, then adult learners who need the flexibility that online courses provide will seek other options within the state. Overwhelmingly, the adult learners who participated in this study found the online asynchronous option to be essential in their ability to complete a college degree. If students do not feel a sense of community or belonging to FCC, and other options are available, they may go elsewhere.

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Date:
Time:
Interviewee:

Research Questions

Guiding Question: How do online students at FCC describe a sense of school community when completing online courses?

1. In what ways do online students perceive a sense of school community as being present at FCC?
2. What aspects of a sense of school community do students at FCC perceive as contributing to successful completion of online courses?

Sense of school community involves students feeling they belong, trust others, and feel safe; have easy access to others; feeling supported by the school; feeling they matter to other students and the school; feeling they have duties and obligations to others; thinking educational needs are being met; and thinking that they have shared goals and values.

Introduction

Hello _____,
Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research study. The purpose of this research study is to understand how students' experiences and perceptions of a sense of school community contribute to their ability to complete online general education courses. I first want to remind you about the informed consent form that you emailed back to me with the words "I consent". As stated in that form, this study is confidential and voluntary. As such, you may withdraw at any time. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be recorded to allow me to transcribe the interview for accuracy and analysis. I will also send you a draft of my results for your review when they are complete. Do you still wish to proceed?

Wonderful. As you know from the invitation to participate, I was once an adult student at the college and also took online courses. I have since, become an online educator and doctoral student who is very interested in learning more about the experiences other adult students have in their online courses. I do not expect your experience to be the same or different from mine - the point of this research is to understand your unique perspective. With that in mind, do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions and Possible Probes

1. How would you describe you?

2. Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college (*RQ#1-Behavior*).

   Possible Probes
   - Describe an example of ways you have interacted with others outside the classroom.
   - Describe give an example of ways you have interacted with others in the classroom.
   - Tell me more about that.
   - Describe for me a "typical" day.

3. Tell me how your interactions at the college make you feel (*RQ#1- Feeling*).

   Possible Probes
   - With faculty? With students? With staff?
   - Describe an example of when you felt that way.
   - Tell me more about that.
   - Why do you feel that way?
   - What others feelings have you had?
   - Walk me through the best day you had at the college.

4. In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like (*RQ#1-Opinion*)?

   Possible Probes
   - How would you feel?
   - Talk more about that.
   - How would that work?

5. In what ways do you think the things we have been discussing could affect an adult student's successful completion of online courses *(RQ#2 –Opinion)*?

Possible Probes
- Opportunities for interactions?
- The way interactions make you feel?
- Description of a sense of community at FCC
- What is missing?

6. Put yourself in the role of being the director of online courses, describe how you would establish and maintain a sense of school community for your online students. *(RQ#2–Opinion)*

Possible Probes
- Talk more about that.
- How would that work?

7. Is there anything else that you would like to share about being an online student at the college?

Thank you for participating in this interview! I have enjoyed learning about your experiences and thoughts on being an online student at the college. My next steps involve the long process of transcribing this interview, analyzing the data, and preparing the results. I anticipate this process to take several more months. Once I have a draft of the results, I will email those to you for your review. As compensation of your time for participating in this interview, I will be emailing you a $20 e-gift card to Target. Please watch your email to confirm you receive it within in the next 10 days. If at any point you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone or email.

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study of online course completion and a sense of school community. The researcher is inviting adults, 18 or older, who are currently registered in a fully online general education course to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Kathleen Stone, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to understand how students' experiences and perceptions of a sense of school community contribute to their ability to complete online general education courses.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:
- Participate in one 60-minute phone interview that will be recorded for transcription and accuracy purposes.
- Read a draft of the researcher's findings and provide written feedback to the researcher about its accuracy.

Here are some sample questions:
- Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college.
- In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at ███████ Community College will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during or after the study. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue, stress or becoming upset. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing

This study has the potential to benefit students who take online courses by understanding possible ways to help them successfully complete their courses and degree programs and have a positive experience at the college. At completion of the research, you will receive a 1-2 page summary of the results.

Payment:
Participants will receive a $20 Target e-gift card, via email, within 10-days of completion of the interview as compensation for their time.

Privacy:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by the researcher electronically using password protection that is only known to the researcher. Any hard copies of data will be kept in the researcher's locked firebox. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:
You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at <u>Kathleen.Stone@Waldenu.edu</u> or by phone at ███████████. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 3121210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **10-09-14-0172534** and it expires on **October 8, 2015.**

Please print or save this consent form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By replying to this email with the words, "I consent", I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Appendix D: Letter of Cooperation

Dr. Cheryl A. Lesser
V.P. Academic Affairs

September 19, 2014

Dear Kathleen Stone,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled "Exploring Online Community College Course Completion and a Sense of School Community" within   Community College. As part of this study, I authorize you to work with college staff to invite online students through the college's learning management system and through email to participate in open-ended, semi-structured interviews. Participants will be asked to member check the results of the interviews for accuracy. Confidentiality will include using alias for all participants and the institution. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. The research results will be presented to   Community College in an executive summary and the resulting project will be freely available to use, if desired.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: Having the online learning coordinator identify the fully online courses running during the semester of the data collection that are considered general education courses, having the online learning coordinator post the initial invitation to participate in the learning management system within one week of receiving it from the researcher, and if the initial announcement does not produce enough participants, the online learning coordinator will post follow-up announcements provided by the researcher. In the event the online learning coordinator is not available, the institution will identify another qualified person to provide this support. Students will contact the researcher directly. Supervision of the research will be provided by the researcher's doctoral faculty committee members. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

Equal Opportunity /Affirmative Action Employer.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

Cheryl A. Lesser

Cheryl A. Lesser
Vice President for Academic Affairs
███ Community College

Walden University policy on electronic signatures: An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically. Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Electronic signatures are only valid when the signer is either (a) the sender of the email, or (b) copied on the email containing the signed document. Legally an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. Walden University staff verify any electronic signatures that do not originate from a password-protected source (i.e., an email address officially on file with Walden).

Appendix E: Initial Invitation to Participate

Subject Line: Invitation to Participate in Online Research Study

Dear Online Student,

My name is Kathleen Stone and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting a study with adult online students. As a doctoral student and former adult student of ▮▮▮▮ Community College, who also took online courses, I am interested in hearing about your experiences and thoughts related to a sense of school community and the completion of online general education courses. I am looking for 10 students who are 18 or older and currently taking a fully online general education course, to participate in an individual phone interview. Participants will receive a $20 Target e-gift card, via email, within 10-days of completion of the interview as compensation for their time.

Your participation is voluntary and no one at ▮▮▮▮ Community College will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. I am not an employee of ▮▮▮▮ Community College. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during or after the study. Any information you provide will be kept confidential. I will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Each participant will be provided a consent form to sign via email prior to participating.

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at Kathleen.Stone@Waldenu.edu or by phone at ▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 3121210.

If you are willing to participate, please email me at Kathleen.Stone@Waldenu.edu with possible times that are convenient for you to complete the phone interview. Please schedule a 60-minute block of time for the interview. The interview will be recorded so that I can create a transcript of the conversation to analyze for the study. I will also send you a draft of my initial findings for you to review and let me know if I am accurate with my interpretation. At completion of the research, I will send you a 1-2 page summary of the results.

I appreciate your consideration to participate in my research study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Kathleen Stone

Doctoral Candidate
Walden University

Appendix F: Follow-up Invitation to Participate

Subject Line: Still Slots Open! Invitation to Participate in Online Research Study

Dear Online Student,

There are still slots available to be part of a research study that has the potential to help improve the online experience for students at ▮▮▮. My name is Kathleen Stone and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting a study with adult online students. As a doctoral student and former adult student of ▮▮▮ Community College, who also took online courses, I am interested in hearing about your experiences and thoughts related to a sense of school community and the completion of online general education courses. I am looking for 10 students who are 18 or older and currently taking a fully online general education course, to participate in an individual phone interview. Participants will receive a $20 Target e-gift card, via email, within 10-days of completion of the interview as compensation for their time.

Your participation is voluntary and no one at ▮▮▮ Community College will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. I am not an employee of ▮▮▮ Community College. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during or after the study. Any information you provide will be kept confidential. I will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Each participant will be provided a consent form to sign via email prior to participating.

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at Kathleen.Stone@Waldenu.edu or by phone at ▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 3121210.
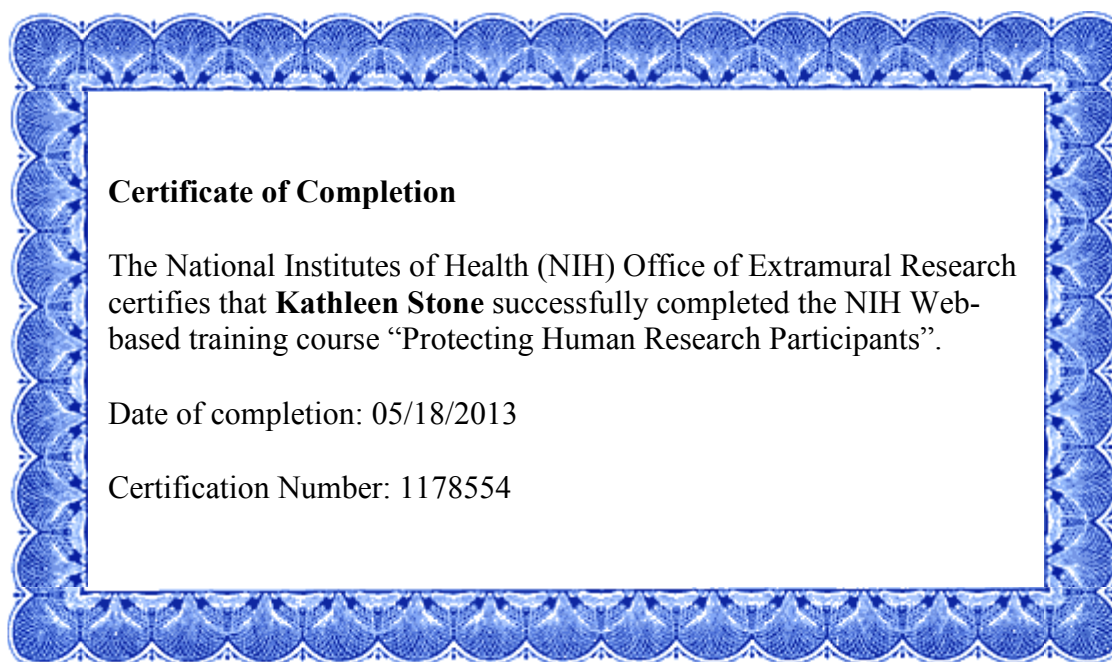
If you are willing to participate, please email me at Kathleen.Stone@Waldenu.edu with possible times that are convenient for you to complete the phone interview. Please schedule a 60-minute block of time for the interview. The interview will be recorded so that I can create a transcript of the conversation to analyze for the study. I will also send you a draft of my initial findings for you to review and let me know if I am accurate with my interpretation. At completion of the research, I will send you a 1-2 page summary of the results.

I appreciate your consideration to participate in my research study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Kathleen Stone
Doctoral Candidate
Walden University

Appendix G: National Institutes of Health Certificate of Completion

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Kathleen Stone** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 05/18/2013

Certification Number: 1178554

Appendix H. Member Checking Summaries and Responses

PARTICIPANT 1

Background
Participant One is an adult female with children returning to school after a few years away. She just has a newborn, which is why she chose mostly online classes for this semester. She is taking three online courses and one on campus course during the fall 2014 semester. She wants to pursue a pharmacy degree. She previously experienced two layoffs in one year and is looking for career change.

Question: Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college

With Students
Student interaction online is limited to mainly mandatory graded discussions. If discussions were not mandatory, there would be no interaction. Other options available for interacting include email, but no one uses email. No one tries to interact past due dates, and often the option is not available because the instructor closes the discussion at a certain date. On campus, she can participate in study groups and tutor fellow students.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly mandatory in discussion forums
- Other options are limited and not used
- On campus has other opportunities to interact

With Faculty
Faculty interaction is limited to feedback on assignments and emails. Feedback is usually small comments, but can be more detailed if it is something important. This limited interaction can vary by course, with some being highly automated, resulting in no instructor interaction at all. On campus, interactions with faculty can occur outside the classroom with review sessions and helping one connect to other students.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly feedback on assignments and occasional emails
- Interaction amount varies by course and instructor
- On campus interactions are more varied

Question: Tell me how your interactions at the college make you feel.

With Students
Generally, she feels she does not really know the other students. She feels like she is in the same course, but not on the same path. It is just individuals bunched together in a

course with no common goal. She has become familiar with some posters. However, sometimes interactions feel pointless. When she does not understand a student's post, there is worry about responding and looking bad since it is graded. She could email the student for clarification, but feels weird to try that route. On campus, she feels a kinship with others. She feels together and like she knows them more personally. There is a sense of being in it together and having common goals.

Main Points
- Don't really know each other
- No common goal online
- Feels pointless/weird
- On campus you know each other and have common goals - a belonging

With Faculty
The interactions with faculty in the automated course are so lacking that she feels cheated. It does not promote interaction in any way. She appreciates the method in some regards, but the interaction is lacking. Feels forgotten, as if they do not even remember she had a baby at the beginning. She thinks more interaction would help one feel valued and help learning. The classes with more interaction help her feel more accomplished. On campus, she feels more valued, gets valuable time with the teacher, and feels they know her in a more personal way.

Main Points
- Feels cheated when there is no interaction
- Feels forgotten
- More interaction helps increase feelings of being valued
- On campus feels more valued

In General
Online feels clinical. It is convenient, but she does not feel a sense of school community online. She does not feel supported. She feels everyone is just trying to get through. She also thinks she will just forget it all and it will not matter. There was a glimmer of community at first with the introductions, some had common backgrounds, but it faded. There is not enough time to build community.

Main Points
- No sense of school community online
- Community takes time to develop

Question: In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like?

With a sense of school community, she would feel more included. Students would have the opportunity to get to know each other and not have that interaction be graded. You would have a sense of who the other students are, working towards a common goal, and feel supported by each other. On campus, you can get to know other teachers.

Main Points
- Feel included
- Know each other
- Common goals
- Feel supported

Question: In what ways do you think the things we have been discussing could affect an adult student's successful completion of online courses?

It would depend on the person. A sense of school community would create a support system. Right now, students do not know each other, never interact voluntarily, and do not feel supported. She needs support to help her get through it. Online is convenient, which is its best quality for adults. She may not take online courses if she did not have to though. Time management is an important issue that one needs to have in order to take online courses. On campus, she wants to understand and remember the material more. She fells supported and like everyone is going towards the same goal.

Main Points
- Support system is important
- Online is convenient
- Time management skills are important

Question: Put yourself in the role of being the director of online courses, describe how you would establish and maintain a sense of school community for your online students.

It would help to increase communication options for students. There could be separate ungraded discussions, chat rooms, and/or community boards where students can chat and post without fear about being graded. More information about on campus activities would be helpful. Student-teacher relationships are important. It would help to increase contact from teachers. To feel valued and a sense of belonging, teachers need to reach out a few times. Positive relationships build community. There should be clear communication of support services available for online students, such as tutoring and technology help.

Main Points

- Increase ungraded communication options for students
- Share on campus activities
- Increase student-teacher interactions
- Clear communication of support services

PARTICIPANT 2

Background
Participant Two is an adult female, taking one online math course as a non-matriculated student. She is only taking the one course at FCC to use the credit toward finishing her 4-year degree at another college. She has never taken an online course at FCC before. She has taken an online course a few years ago at the institution she is getting her degree through and another online course earlier this year through a different state college. She works part-time remotely from home. She does not live near the college.

Question: Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college

With Students
We have group projects, but the online interaction they are allowed to have for the project is on a discussion thread only. The interaction is not very responsive and only one student out of four has been posting. We also have weekly mandatory graded discussions for the whole class. They have not been fruitful, insightful, or deep conversations. The interaction is not the same as it would be in the classroom. The first discussion was to introduce yourself and talk about anxiety around math and study tips.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly mandatory in discussion forums
- Interaction is not the same as it would be in the classroom.
- Group project is limiting in interaction possibilities

With Faculty
For the most part, she does not have a lot of interaction with her professor. She is only aware of the professor's presence when she returns grades. She will email her if there is an issue. For example, at the beginning of class, there was a problem with the textbook website and she emailed the professor to help.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly posting of grades
- Emailing the professor is an option for interaction

With Staff and general

Since she is not local, she cannot come to campus to register or pay. She used phone calls and email to complete the process. It was a little difficult to figure out. There were random details that were not explained well through email or online. In classes, there is no skyping or face-to-face communication at all. She does not get much interaction through email.

Main Points
- The process to register and pay from a distance could be clearer
- There is no face-to-face communication for someone at a distance at all

Question: Tell me how your interactions at the college make you feel.

With Students
She feels like it is a struggle to get people to participate. She feels frustrated sometime with collaborative work. Discussion boards cannot emulate real life discussion very well.

Main Points
- Feels like a struggle to collaborate
- Feels frustrated to collaborate

With Faculty
She feels like the professor could be anyone. Professors are invisible. She thinks it is ok if they are, because she has years of school experience behind her, she knows how to teach herself, and she prefers to teach herself. Part of her likes that the group project is monitored with one discussion board, so the professor sees what the students are doing. Otherwise, she would feel weird telling on the students that do not perform.

Main Points
- Feels online professors are very invisible
- She feels ok about it since she prefers to self-teach

In General
She feels more mature from following online etiquette and the responsibility of completing things on your own, in your own time. It feels professional, and feels that is a good skill that some students need. Since she is just taking one class, she does not feel any strong emotions from the experience. She felt a little anxious when trying to register and pay because of the lack of clarity. Overall, she feels very neutral. If she does the readings and homework, it is enough. Since she is almost done school and it is her only course at the college, she is not looking for community feeling. However, online can feel removed and feels pretend. When she was a full-time student, a sense of school community would help with motivation and the removed, pretend feeling.

Main Points

- Online classes make her feel mature and professional
- She does not feel any strong emotions about them
- Anxious when registering/paying
- Online can feel removed and pretend
- A sense of community is not important for her, but would have been earlier in her college career

Question: In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like?

A greater sense of community is achieved when professors are more involved in discussions. She has taken some courses at other institutions where the professor will take the lead, respond to struggling students, and share meaningful responses. Group projects also gives students a way to work together. It can motivate someone to put his or her best foot forward and communicate.

Main Points
- Professors would be more involved with discussions
- Students would work collaboratively
- Projects can motivate people to do their best work

Question: In what ways do you think the things we have been discussing could affect an adult student's successful completion of online courses?

A sense of school community would help motivate students to care more on a sentimental level. They would care about responding more if they are connected and involved in what feels like a real thing. It would motivate students to do better work. Having opportunities to use people as resources who are going through the same program would help too.

Main Points
- Provides motivation to be successful
- Need to feel connected and feel involved in a real thing
- Support system would help

Question: Put yourself in the role of being the director of online courses, describe how you would establish and maintain a sense of school community for your online students.

She acknowledged it is a "wicked problem". She felt that one of the most important things was to learn about the students. She would want to know who they are, how the class and platform will help them meet their goals, what the current problems are, and how to find solutions. She thinks it is important to do a lot of testing. One problem that she believes exists is that students do not engage enough. She would like a way that

easily tracks her own engagement compared to other students. There could be a minimum engagement level that everyone must meet.

Main Points
- Learn about and from the students
- Design for student goals
- Create solutions from the students feedback
- Increase and track engagement

PARTICIPANT 3

Background
Participant three is a 26 year old adult female returning to school to obtain an RN degree. She already has a Bachelor's degree in sports nutrition from a four-year college. She has been working in the health care field and a RN degree now makes more sense for her. She is taking one English course online while taking other courses on campus. She appreciates the option to take a course online because of the time constraints from the other courses and life in general. Her perspective includes mostly a campus-based experience while taking one small online course.

Question: Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college

With Students
The small-scale nature of online classrooms creates a nice intimate environment. Everyone seems interested and involved. Discussion boards are active. On campus though, there is no delay in communication. However, not everyone who wants to weight in do so in a face-to-face environment. Online everyone has to participate.

Main Points
- Small class sizes are important for interaction
- Discussion boards are active

With Faculty
Faculty interaction has been positive. The instructor is available, typically within hours. Communication is typically text-based. We do not have webinars. They do have on campus office hours, which provide a way to put a face to the name. They use a variety of learning methods, so there is a lot available to help you learn.

Main Points
- Interaction has been responsive
- Interaction is typically text-based, but office hours on campus available
- Use a variety of teaching methods

Question: Tell me how your interactions at the college make you feel.

In General
So far, she feels valued and positive from her online experience. Students have been involved. She does feel it is lacking some same time communication. A webinar or messaging system would help reduce delay; however, adults also need the asynchronous nature of online learning that makes it convenient compared to on campus courses. She feels impressed with the learning she has gained so far. She feels accountable, encouraged, and rewarded in the online environment. A sense of school community where people are there to help each other can get lost online sometimes if people do not feel committed.

Main Points
- Feels valued, accountable, encouraged, and rewarded
- Fells like same time communication is missing
- Feels commitment is important

Question: In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like?
It would be a well-rounded, multi-faceted approach. Students would have profiles so people can learn more about each other, what they like, and why they are taking courses online to get a better sense of each other. Those types of conversations are not possible like they are between classes on campus. Having open dialogue can also build rapport. Students can help each other and not get down on themselves. The environment should not be overwhelming. It should be clear to start and easy to figure out in order to help build community. Seeing events and activities happening around the school helps you feel connected.

Main Points
- Students would know each other
- The environment would be clear and easy to follow
- Students would support each other
- Easy to see what is happening around the college

Question: In what ways do you think the things we have been discussing could affect an adult student's successful completion of online courses?
She thinks that community can make you want to be involved more. The connections you make can transfer to your local community if you see them in town. It is rewarding to not just be another number. Community makes it worth it and effective. Having a personal project to relate to is also good, especially sharing your work with other students. You feel pride – sharing is the most valuable part.

Main Points

- Community increases involvement
- Community is rewarding and effective
- Sharing with others is the most important part

Question: Put yourself in the role of being the director of online courses, describe how you would establish and maintain a sense of school community for your online students.

To establish a sense of school community, ask the students for their input. Try to incorporate on campus activities so students see everything happening on campus. Create collaboration and ways to share unique characteristics that everyone has. Classes can be overwhelming and time consuming – using a bulletin board or some other way to support each other, which does not take up too much time, would be helpful.

Main Points
- Ask students for input
- Share on campus activities
- Provide means for collaboration and support

PARTICIPANT 4

Background

Participant Four is a 29-year-old adult male student. He was a manager for a satellite TV provider and a couple other local places before deciding to go back to college. He chose FCC because he was familiar with the area. He decided to get back into pre-nursing education. He figured it would be very helpful since a lot of jobs are requiring highly educated people with degrees. He got into human services and addiction counseling and that is something that he is passionate about. He is in his fourth semester, graduating at the end of this semester. He has taken courses face-to-face, hybrid, and fully online. He has also been active in clubs and student senate.

In general, he believes that online courses are important for adult students, because they give them an opportunity to work on their own time. They have busy schedules and online courses provide balance and options.

Question: Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college

With Students

In the online environment, it is difficult to meet people. Most are busy adult learners; there has not been much interaction. Student interaction online is limited to mainly mandatory graded discussions. There is the ability to ask questions. He gets occasional emails from students, but it is infrequent. He prefers hybrid courses. They allow some face-to-face interaction. They also helped him get involved with clubs and student senate, leading to the building of relationships with other students.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly mandatory in discussion forums
- Other options are limited and not used much
- Hybrid courses provide other opportunities to interact

With Faculty
Online interaction with faculty is mostly done by email. You can see them on campus or call. He has not meet online instructors in person during the course – only knows and interacts with them virtually, unless he took an on campus class from them. He feels that interaction is easier face-to-face. He likes hybrid courses. They let him see the faculty and become more familiar with them. They can see if you understand the material better. Overall, interaction is limited and it impacts community feeling.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly email
- Only knows them virtually
- Hybrid courses let you know them better
- Interaction is limited and it impacts community feeling

Question: Tell me how your interactions at the college make you feel.

With Students
Interactions with other students online feel odd, because you never know what they are going to talk about – you do not know them. He is often ahead of others in the work, so they will ask him questions. He tries to help, but it feels odd since he does not know what they understand. He feels frustrated that they wait until the last minute. Not knowing what they understand and their procrastination makes it difficult to help them. He feels that hybrid courses help to eliminate those feelings and make meeting peers a little easier.

Main Points
- Don't really know where each other is at academically
- Feels odd and frustrating trying to help
- On campus (hybrid) you know each other better

With Faculty
Faculty interactions online are weird, because you never see them. You do not really know them. Some have audio recordings, so you hear them. If you see them on campus later, it is weird and helps you pull together everything you learned. It is enlightening. You feel that you know them better, if you can see them. Pictures online would help. Hybrid courses help, because you have time to meet them and you can talk about what you are learning face-to-face.

Main Points
- Feels weird to not see faculty
- Feels you don't know them the same as hybrid or on campus
- Feels enlightened if he later meets them in person

<u>Question: In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like?</u>
With a sense of school community, everybody would be interacting and happy. They would go the extra mile for each other, they would help them understand the material, and take the time to explain something. He does not feel a sense of school community in fully online courses at all, because he does not know who the people are or how seriously they are taking the courses. Some do not always do the work. You may never get to meet them online and will not have that sense of school community. Hybrid gives some of that school community vibe because you get to see them. You would need different technology to do that online. Seeing people online would be a lot better for building community than database type communication. Discussions are ok, but you do not get to put faces to names. You never see them or know who they are. You cannot build school community online if you only use database type programs for the courses.

Main Points
- Students would be interacting, happy and supportive of each other
- You would know them better
- Don't have school community online, you don't see them
- Need technology solutions to help build online school community

<u>Question: In what ways do you think the things we have been discussing could affect an adult student's successful completion of online courses?</u>
If he had to first take a fully online course only, email would be one of the only ways to communicate with the teacher if he did not understand something. Adults are very busy and time management is an issue as well. It could be really tough to complete if you had no other exposure to the college. You could not just go find your professor on campus. It could affect what you understand and even play a part in passing or failing. Online is missing awareness – awareness of who your professor is, who the other classmates are, of everything – how things are in the classroom what is expected, some may have problems with technology and not be familiar to it. If his first semester back to school as an adult was only online, it would have been difficult. Simple support is huge. It is a gap; if you a can fill the awareness piece, it would go a long way.

Main Points
- Time management skills are important
- Harder to access professor – could impact success
- Awareness of everything is missing

- Support system is important

Question: Put yourself in the role of being the director of online courses, describe how you would establish and maintain a sense of school community for your online students.

At the beginning of a course, he would have an orientation type thing where everyone gets to see each other. That way there would be videos or images to put names to faces. It would also help if you later saw them somewhere in person. Without this online will never have the sense of school community. Orientation could be in a classroom or using video technology. Hybrid courses are great for this because they give you a chance to meet each other. Online you could use cameras that are on laptops or even phones. Backboard or other video conferences tools could be used. You could see who is in your class.

Main Points
- Have an orientation in person or using technology
- Include video/images
- Need a chance to get to know each other for community to build

PARTICIPANT 5

Participant Five is an adult female in her 20's, with two children. When she graduated school, she was not planning to go to college at all. She had her first child right after high school. A few years later, she had her second child, so it made it difficult to do much. She decided to go to college two years ago. At first, she went part-time and now that her kids are a little bit older she can go full-time, but it is still hard for her. That is why she started taking some online classes. This semester she is taking two online courses and two on campus courses. She utilizes the campus daycare for when she is on campus, but it is cost prohibitive to attend more classes on campus than she already does. She is going for business administration.

Question: Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college

With Students
Student interaction online is limited to mainly mandatory graded discussions. There is no interaction outside the course work. There is a help forum that people can post questions that they may have. We sometimes have group projects, but right now, those projects are for on campus classes.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly mandatory in discussion forums
- Help forums are available
- On campus class has group project to interact

With Faculty

She does not really interact with faculty online, except when she gets grades from them. Faculty interact with students a little in discussion forums. On campus, she can meet with faculty after class. She also uses the tutoring center on campus to get help with both online and on campus courses. She stumbled onto the tutoring center. She has seen links to an online tutoring service, but she has not used it yet.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly about grades
- There is some interaction in the discussion forums
- On campus interactions are more varied
- She utilizes on campus tutoring, since she is on campus for some classes and has daycare

Question: Tell me how your interactions at the college make you feel.

With Students

She feels it is easier to talk to students online if they are in the same program. She becomes more comfortable with them, if she sees them in more classes. It is different than talking to students you do not know online. If you do not understand something, it is more comfortable to reach out to someone that you know. She liked interacting on campus, because she is home alone a lot.

Main Points
- Does not feel comfortable with students she doesn't really know
- Feels more comfortable if she knows them from the same program
- Interaction helps reduce loneliness

With Faculty

The interactions with faculty around technical issues with assignment submissions made her feel like they were not paying attention to her work and may not know how to use the technology. She wishes there was a way to not feel like you are on your own. She feels frustrated.

Main Points
- Feels faculty don't pay attention to her work
- Feels frustrated
- Feels on her own

In General

She felt the happiest when she was accepted into Phi Theta Kappa, the honor society on campus. She went to the initiation ceremony. Initially, her family was not supportive of her attending school. This made her proud and it felt good to show her family.

Main Points
- Felt happy and proud of being included in honor society
- Helped with her initial lack of family support

Question: In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like?
There would be a support system in place so you had a place to get help. No one would be treated differently. Older students would feel included. Right now, you just post in discussions. It is not the same as going to class on campus. A virtual classroom may help people interact more. You could interact with the teacher more also.

Main Points
- There would be a support system
- Everyone would feel included
- Could interact more

Question: In what ways do you think the things we have been discussing could affect an adult student's successful completion of online courses?
The lack of face-to-face interaction impacted grading issues for her. It was hard for her to explain, and for the teacher to believe her, when she submitted assignments that did not show up for the teacher. It hurt her grade because it happened a few times and the teacher gave her zeros, even though she submitted the work. She had to start emailing the submission as well to make sure the teacher received it. She did not feel she could go against what the teacher said so she did not even think about trying to contact the help desk. Some teachers online can meet on campus, but not every student has that opportunity and not every teacher has on campus office hours. There needs to be a better way to talk to teachers, or they need to be available with online office hours. It would also help if it were easier to interact with students and build connections like those that she has with the other business students. It helps her feel more comfortable to reach out to people when she needs help, if she feels more of a connection.

Main Points
- Lack of instructor interaction and technical problems impact grades
- It can be hard to contact teachers
- There needs to be better awareness of support for everyone
- Additional and easier ways to contact instructors is needed
- Without connections to students, it is uncomfortable to reach out for help

Question: Put yourself in the role of being the director of online courses, describe how you would establish and maintain a sense of school community for your online students.

She would make it easier to contact the teacher. It would also help to have a virtual classroom with a webcam. You could see the teacher actually teaching, and ask questions right away. Technology would be needed to make it feel like a real classroom. The most important thing is to have a better way to communicate. The main way to communicate is on discussion forums. There needs to be a way to get to know each other and make it more like an actual school. There could be a schedule and everyone could be online at the same time. For some students, it would not work because they take online courses for the convenience of them. However, she thinks it would be easier to get help. She often feels like she is the only one online. It would have to be optional/not graded because with kids and other adult responsibilities, it is hard to do that type of set schedule at home. Having clear instructions for where to go for support is important. Overall, there needs to be better communication.

Main Points
- Need better communication with teachers and students
- Provide a more interactive virtual classroom
- Clear communication of support services

PARTICIPANT 6

Background
Participant 6 is an adult female student with a three young children. She is a full-time student and a stay-at-home mom. Four out of five of the classes she is taking are online. The on campus course is an evening phlebotomy class. She is working towards a degree in humanities and social sciences. Outside of school and childcare, she spends her days taking care of a grandmother elsewhere.

General thoughts
Online classes are very important for her. Without them, she would not be able to attend. They provide an important opportunity for adult students and are more convenient. She feels that overall the college is supportive. She is grateful for having online classes and for further research about them.

Question: Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college

With Students
She does not interact much with students. Online they use discussion forums that are graded. They are required to create one post and complete two responses. If a student has a question, they can post it on a forum for other people to respond. On campus, classes

can have discussions too and it is easier to say something face-to-face than in text. She does not feel there is much interaction in online classes.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly in discussion forums
- Can post questions
- On campus has other opportunities to interact

With Faculty
Faculty will sometimes post on the discussion forum, but very seldom will they have a response. Usually it is just a simple comment, like good job. You can send them emails if you need help.

Main Points
- Interaction is comments in discussions
- You can send faculty emails

Question: Tell me how your interactions at the college make you feel.

With Students
She feels that interactions with students are essential. If she did not have interactions with other students, she does not think she could be in college. Students understand more what you are going through at that point in time. They have similar questions so it is often easier to work out things with them than the teacher. Online can be more difficult to get to know their personality compared to on campus. Online you can get an image of them and have it be all wrong. She feels online, classmates are there to help each other as a community, and without them, it would be near impossible.

Main Points
- Interactions with students are essential
- Feels that students know what each other is going through
- On campus is a little easier to get to know their personalities

With Faculty
She does not find a big difference between faculty interactions online versus her on campus courses. She does not feel you get as much communication with faculty as students. You do not talk to faculty unless you have a specific question. Online the professor cannot see you struggle as they can on campus. You have to email them.

Main Points
- Feels there is more communication with students than faculty
- Feels that you only talk to them if you have a question

- Feels they can't see you struggle online

Question: In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like?

She thinks it would feel like you are part of something. She feels she has community in the online class. It gives people a chance to interact on their own time. You build a relationship, even though it is in a different way. She has some students in her online class that she knows from high school and on campus classes. That is helpful for the community aspect. It is different if you know them face-to-face. You feel like you really know that person when you see their name.

Main Points
- Feel like you are part of something
- Can build relationships
- Easier if you can see them face-to-face

Question: In what ways do you think the things we have been discussing could affect an adult student's successful completion of online courses?

It would depend on the person. Online is more convenient. She finds it to be less stress for her, but she feels students could have more stress since they are not in a classroom. Online courses help her be successful. She likes the online system, the organization, and the navigation in the class.

Main Points
- Depends on the student
- Stress level could be more or less without a physical classroom
- She likes the organization and navigation of the class

Question: Put yourself in the role of being the director of online courses, describe how you would establish and maintain a sense of school community for your online students.

In the online environment, you cannot talk to students as you can after class. There is no personal relationship or getting to know personalities. It is the one thing that's missing. You cannot build that relationship and those may be important later. People that she really knows are from her on campus class. You cannot put connections together online. You do not get to know people beyond that setting. Things like Facetime may help, but it defeats the purpose of taking an online class. Another thing that may help is a space where people taking similar online classes could chat and support each other. There is not as much stress when you have support. Having a way to communicate college wide announcements and events may be helpful too.

Main Points
- Need a way to get to know people better
- Online chat spaces for people in similar courses

- A feeling of support
- Clear communication of college wide announcements and events

PARTICIPANT 7

Background
Participant 7 is a 29-year-old male adult student, finishing up two general education courses to complete his 2-yr degree. He comes to the college with extensive work and college experience. He went to a state college right out of high school, but was not prepared for college at that time. He then went into the workforce and found a career in the medical field. However, he does not wish to become a nurse, so he is trying to complete his 2-yr degree, and then move out of the area where he hopes to have more opportunities for a career. Currently he feels stuck with no advancement opportunity.

Question: Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college

With Students
He has not had much interaction with students. The interactions he has had are very difficult, because he describes many of the students as being illiterate. He is more educated and the disconnect is exasperated by the difference in ability to write in a coherent manner. Mostly, the interactions are on discussion forums. He does not know who they are without seeing images; it is just text-based communication. Sometimes he will be asked questions, but cannot understand them because of the broken sentences. Interactions are difficult. He thinks if he stayed in school years ago, he would not be dealing with this. He does his best to respond. It is easier to interact with students on campus, because you can talk face-to-face.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly in discussion forums
- Interactions have been difficult due to differences in writing ability
- Easier to interact on campus

With Faculty
Faculty interaction has included emails. He prefers to use the course email system rather than the college-wide email. He has not interacted with faculty often. He interacted more with faculty on campus, stopping to talk with them for up to a half hour after classes.

Main Points
- Interaction is occasional emails
- On campus interactions are easier

General

The college email is unusable. He describes it as being full of junk mail that does not pertain to him. It needs to have filters on it so he does not get emails meant for a small subset of students. He no longer checks college email because of the volume of junk mail.

Question: Tell me how your interactions at the college make you feel.

With Students
He feels online courses are lacking in the student's ability to convey what they are thinking. He feels it is lacking being able to chat about a topic to gain further understanding.

Main Points
- Feels it is hard to convey thoughts online for some students
- Feels it is hard to gain understanding without the ability to chat easily

With Faculty
He enjoys talking to faculty but feels it is not possible online in the way it is on campus. He feels the quality of the content is just as good, and he is getting the same learning.

Main Points
- Enjoys talking to faculty, but feels it is not possible online
- Feels the quality and learning is the same

In General
He feels happy to have the resources of an online class but does not feel any sense of community. He does not feel camaraderie or a sense of belonging to FCC. He feels further isolated by emails referring to clubs and activities aimed at traditional aged students. He does not have a connection towards FCC, because he feels the college does not even care if he is male or female.

Main Points
- No sense of community online
- No camaraderie or sense of belonging
- Feels isolated
- Does not feel any connection

Question: In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like?
He does not feel he fits in because he is older. A sense of school community would help with that feeling. He would have a sense of camaraderie – however, it may not be as needed or not in the same way as it is for younger students. Online can be isolating. Having it feel less isolating, but not socializing in the same way younger students do, would help it seem more like community.

Main Points
- Would feel he fits in and have a sense of camaraderie
- Camaraderie may not be as critical or it may be different for adults
- Online would not feel as isolating

Question: In what ways do you think the things we have been discussing could affect an adult student's successful completion of online courses?
He thinks it can affect completion, but believes he has put himself in that place. It adds a level of difficulty if you cannot understand what they are saying. They use text speak and run on sentences. It makes it easier to do well in the courses compared to students who use text speak.

Main Points
- Can affect completion
- It can be difficult trying to interact with students

Question: Put yourself in the role of being the director of online courses, describe how you would establish and maintain a sense of school community for your online students.
He had not thought about the possibility of having a sense of school community. Only having a text-based introduction on a discussion forum is not enough to build community. He would have small group projects that are worth a small percentage of the grade, so students can work together as a group. He would want it to be small so students are not penalized for those that do not participate. The group work would help him remember the other students. He would also require students and faculty use an image in the course so students can put names and faces together. Those two things together would help build community for later discussions also. Another thing that would help is for the instructor to have a video introduction lecture. Fixing the email system would also help adults care more about the college, and what is going on with the school, even after they leave.

Main Points
- Use small group projects
- Have students and instructors use images
- Include video introductions and lectures
- Fix the email system so students receive information pertinent to them

PARTICIPANT 8

Background

Participant 8 is a 34 year-old adult female taking two fully online courses, one in English and a library research skills course. She is working towards a liberal arts and social science degree. She works full-time and wants to advance within her job. She started a few years ago taking part-time classes at FCC. She has to take them online, because of her fulltime job and the difficulty with scheduling and getting to campus. Her employer likes to see college degree completion on their employee's resumes, but it does not have to be anything specific. She previously took a face-to-face course at a state college back in 2005, but that is her only other college experience.

General
She think online is great and hopes the college offers more classes online, because it is the only way she can attend with working fulltime and being a mom. Online is convenient.

Question: Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college

With Students
Student interaction online is limited to mainly mandatory graded discussions. There is a bulletin board that students can use, but no one does. You can also email each other, but that is not typical.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly mandatory in discussion forums
- Other options are limited and not used

With Faculty
Faculty interaction is mostly email. She will reach out to faculty by email when she has questions about an assignment. Faculty do leave small comments on submissions, but they are typically things like "that's interesting" and "good job".

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly emails
- Faculty leave comments/feedback on submissions

Question: Tell me how your interactions at the college make you feel.

With Students
She feels that she interacts better with students online because she is shy. She feels more open to speak her mind online. When she posts her opinion, other students will respond, often stating they "did not think of that" and that is a nice feeling.

Main Points

- She interacts better with students online
- She feels more comfortable to share her thoughts online
- She feels like her opinion is valued by other students

With Faculty

She feels kind of forgotten by faculty online. Faculty have forgotten to open a new module and it puts the students behind in their work when that happens. One time four days of work time was lost before the faculty member logged in and noticed the problem. Another professor would always take 4-5 days to get back to you if you had a question. This can stop someone from moving forward with understanding the material or completing an assignment while they are waiting.

Main Points
- Feels forgotten

In General

She does not feel overly a part of FCC. She does not have the same sense as if she was going to a classroom on campus. She does check emails that have college events. Since she is not there, she is basically just signing in to class.

Main Points
- No sense of school community online

Question: In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like?

With a sense of school community, people would have more interaction. You would talk with someone and have conversations about things like where they live and what they like to do. You would be able to get to know people. Once you know them, you can have better discussions in the forums.

Main Points
- There would be more interaction
- Students would know each other better

Question: In what ways do you think the things we have been discussing could affect an adult student's successful completion of online courses?

She is doing better in her online courses than she did in high school. More of a sense of school community would help her feel good and really feel like she is part of something. Online is missing spontaneous conversations. When a professor records themselves talking online it helps give a better sense of who they are. It would be helpful if there were things they can do to make students feel more a part of everything.

Main Points
- She is doing better online
- Feeling part of something would be helpful

- Online is missing hearing the professor talk and having spontaneous conversations

Question: Put yourself in the role of being the director of online courses, describe how you would establish and maintain a sense of school community for your online students.

She would have people post pictures of themselves to have a face to put with things. Each module the professor could talk about stuff in a webinar. It would feel more like being in a class. It would also help to get together at school at least once. Students could meet at the beginning of the semester. It would be best to do that face-to-face even for just an hour. For those who can only be online a webinar or video call could also work. There is not a good introduction to online. An introductory class for brand new online students would be really good. It would go a long way towards helping students feel part of the school. Students would not feel lost. They would know who to go to for support. For the introduction session, they could talk about their goals and program. It would help students make connections and find people they have things in common with, which could go a long way towards community building. For support, they do have a help desk, but she was not sure about online tutoring. She thought she would have to go to campus. More interaction from the professors to make you feel a part of it would help too.

Main Points
- Include pictures of each other and video/audio of professor
- Have an introductory session of the course face-to-face or using video conferencing
- Have an orientation for new online students
- Clear communication of support services
- More interaction with faculty

PARTICIPANT 9

Background

Participant 9 is a young adult female student, more traditional age (18), but has responsibilities that many older adults have. She graduated high school and went right into college. She has a part-time job and helps take care of her little brother, so it is easier for her to take online courses. She also lives a long ways from campus. She was able to schedule two online classes and only needs to go in for two days a week to attend the other three classes. It is really a lot more convenient. She also likes the structure and flexibility. She does not plan to get a degree from FCC, but to transfer into an occupational therapy program elsewhere. She thinks that online courses provide an important opportunity for busy adult students to reach their goals.

General Thoughts

Online is not for everyone, but everyone should be allowed to have the opportunity to determine that themselves. Freshman should be able to take online courses without begging. There should be more online courses offered. Especially science classes; it is expensive and hard to get to campus four days a week for science courses. She appreciates that someone is looking at how to make it better.

Question: Tell me about the ways you have interacted with people at the college

With Students
Student interaction online is mainly in discussion forums. She likes to have debates in the forums. She thinks they are easier to do online, because she can research the information during the debate. It provides more time to make sure everything is right. It also allows her to work with people interested in the same thing. She thinks the debates have helped her learn the material better for tests.

Main Points
- Interaction is mostly in discussion forums
- Debates are easier to do online and help her learn

With Faculty
She mostly interacts with faculty via email. Sometimes they will get involved in discussions if students are not being appropriate or if they need to move the discussion along. She thinks they are more willing to help, because they can do it when they have free time, instead of rushing 15 minutes between classes. She can just send them an email and does not feel she is bugging them. Some instructors do not have offices at school so email is the only way to contact them.

Main Points
- Interaction with faculty is mostly via email
- She thinks it is more convenient for faculty
- Some faculty don't have an office – email is the only option

Question: Tell me how your interactions at the college make you feel.

With Students
She feels frustrated when online students ask questions that they could answer themselves by opening their textbooks. They should be prepared. On campus, they seem to ask questions because they do not understand. She feels she reacts better to in person questions. She also feels it is easier to make friends face-to-face. Study groups cannot happen online. She feels it would be awkward to send someone a random email; where

face-to-face you could easily ask questions. If you do not understand something, you have to wait until someone replies. It can leave you confused.

Main Points
- She feels frustrated when students are not prepared
- She feels it is easier to connect face-to-face
- She feels it is awkward to send emails
- It is easy to be left confused if not one helps quickly

With Faculty
She feels like she is just a number. It is just do this and this and then send it in – where on campus they learn your name and understand your learning style. They talk to you and ask about your day. She likes learning face-to-face and listening to lectures. It is more personal than a cold email. They do post a phone number, but it feels awkward to call.

Main Points
- Feels like a number
- Emails feel cold
- Awkward to call faculty
- On campus feels more of a connection

In General
Interactions online feel detached from both students and faculty. It is not very personal.
Main Points
- Online feels detached and impersonal

Question: In your opinion, what would a sense of school community look like?
When she thinks school community, she imagines togetherness, like a family. She does not think you can get that online, because it is so detached feeling. You do not get to know students one semester versus if you are with them for an entire program and get a personal connection that stays. She cannot be connected to someone unless she sees him or her. She learns the names of some people online that she likes to discuss with, but she could not tell you who that person is or what they look like.

Main Points
- It would be togetherness, like a family
- Easier if you are with people more than one semester
- Needs to see people to connect to them

Question: In what ways do you think the things we have been discussing could affect an adult student's successful completion of online courses?

Online classes are helpful for busy adults because of the convenience. It can get frustrating if the teacher is not responding or not being understanding. She gets frustrated because she works and they give due dates the day before it is due. It is hard to get everything done. It can cause stress and frustration. It is missing personal connections. It is very detached. It can be hard if you do not have good time management skills and it is easy to get overwhelmed.

Main Points
- Can be frustrating if the teacher is not responding
- It can cause stress when due dates are last minute
- Detached and missing personal connections
- Time management skills are important

Question: Put yourself in the role of being the director of online courses, describe how you would establish and maintain a sense of school community for your online students.

At some point, the class should meet in person so everyone would know who they are talking with later. Meeting once a month or halfway through the year and at the beginning of the class would help. At the beginning of class, you basically get a list of things to do and so it is a lot of responsibility. If they have an orientation, they could go over tactics on how to manage taking online courses. It can be overwhelming if you do not pay attention and have six tests all due at midnight. So, an orientation to make sure students know what they are getting into would help. Not everyone would be a good fit for online. Teachers need to understand the technology better. She has had teachers close discussions, and then she will see unread post notifications that she can never go read. There is technology training for students and that is helpful. She was confused before she took that training. It is also good to get emails of things happening on campus. She checks her portal every couple of days. A problem though is adults cannot always attend events on campus because of time constraints or living far from campus like she does.

Main Points
- There should be a chance to meet in person
- There should be an orientation for taking online courses
- Have teachers take technology training

PARTICIPANT RESPONSES TO MEMBER CHECK REQUEST

Participant 1: Sent request twice and received no response either time.

Participant 2: "I have reviewed the interview draft and it looks good. Thanks!"

Participant 3: "I just took a peak at your impressions and feel as though they are right on! There aren't any changes or additions that I would like to make at this time, thank you."

Participant 4: "Everything looks great! It was great to re-read everything that I had said during our interview, and I believe that you have captured the main points of the conversation perfectly."

Participant 5: "I just wanted to let you know that I read the entire document that you had attached, and everything seems to look to good."

Participant 6: "Sounds good to me."

Participant 7: "Yes, that is an accurate representation of my thoughts. Thanks."

Participant 8: "The attached is completely accurate of our conversation. Thanks!!"

Participant 9: "It looks good to me!"

Appendix I. Researcher's Reflective Notes

10/14

I am sitting here waiting for interview number three to begin. I have three to do in quick fashion tonight one after another. I am on a mission to get through this program. I am enjoying hearing the different perspectives from the students so far. The first one seemed to fit what I thought almost to a T. It was just as interesting that the second one had more variation. For these two so far, there is no sense of school community in the online environment and even very little classroom community. I am hopeful that all the interviews tonight will pan put and bring different perspectives to this process. I do think interviewing is the most fun part. Especially considering how much I dislike writing. I did not anticipate how much the face-to-face experience would inform some of the conversations I have had so far. It is an important point to acknowledge that moving forward.

10/19

I am very thankful that I had an interview protocol guide to help me through the process of interviewing. I am especially glad that I took the time to add prompts. What I have found to be difficult though is what to do when the prompts I have listed, do not really make sense for how a discussion may be going. Each interview has been so different. Some have spoken to the questions perfectly – did not need much prompts at all. I ask how interactions make them feel and they go full speed into their feelings. I have found that for others I need to pull on those prompts to get them to open up more. It feels very natural to just ask more specific follow up questions at that point. I have found that once I do – they then seem to open up more and branch off into other topics that are related. My comfort level improves with each interview – but I still am not a fan of interviewing. I recently completed the MBTI at work (ISTJ) and realized that part of my uncomfortableness is simply that it is out of preference for my personality. It's not that I can't do this or that I don't find value in it, because I can and I do. It is simply not my preferred way of doing research. I am already thinking about what I will do after I graduate with this topic. I would like to continue to research this later on, but from a quantitative lens.

10/26

Transcription is very tedious and I hate the sound of my own voice. The students were absolutely amazing though. They were so generous with their time and thoughts. For the next two weeks, I will finish the transcription and start the analysis process. I am looking forward to this part tremendously. One thing I have already noticed while transcribing is that they will often answer an earlier question later and vice versa. This will be important to note when I start analysis. For example, they will discuss how interactions make them feel before I ask. My last question has been really important for some interviews. It simply asked them if there was anything else they wanted to add, that we had not talked about already. For some they provided an excellent summary of their experiences and

others used the chance to talk more in depth about an earlier question or something we had not talked about that was important to them. I am very pleased so far with the insights I think I will gain from their responses.

11/2

I was prepared for it to take a long time to get participants, so I was very surprised at how quickly it went. I am not sure if I was prepared mentally for how fast it went. As the interviews progressed, I learned to relax more with them. I also feel like there is so much lead up to this point, that it was almost surreal getting to actually talk to people! Looking back, I learned that it is important to be relaxed. I equate it to giving a presentation. The first time you may be very nervous, but as you get used to it, the nerves give way. I don't remember seeing that in a textbook! Now back to transcribing so I can get into analysis!

11/9

I have begun with the first interview, reading the transcript a few times, making notes in margins, circling, and underlining things that stick out. I then started highlighting and cutting/pasting quotes from the transcript into a spreadsheet to keep track of them. I have them by question. For those quotes that apply more directly to an earlier or later question, I past them in the appropriate place. I am also color-coding by question and by faculty, student, or staff interactions. I have started labeling the quotes. I am really using this first one to explore what will work best. I will read through and start analyzing other transcripts, cut and paste, assign labels, and begin to see how they interact with each other.

11/16

I will be composing a draft of my analysis of each interview that I will send to the participants to review to make sure that I have interpreted what they have said accurately. Right now, I am reading each transcript twice, cutting quotes from them, and adding those quotes to a spreadsheet, by question. I then read the quotes again and try to summarize them into shorter phrases. If a quote fits with a different question, I move it but note where it was discussed. I am also typing a very brief bio about the participant has I do this. I feel the need to read them all before I go back to try and fine tune the phrases I am assigning. Once I go back and do that, I will write up the individual analysis to send to each participant. Then I will work on the cross-analysis to see what themes emerge. I imagine that I will have a sense of those already at that point. This process is a weird mix for me of being enjoyable, tedious, and frustrating. It is wonderful to be immersed in the data, but the volume can be overwhelming.

11/23

I need to summarize quotes from two of the interviews still. I add those quotes to an excel spreadsheet. I have a book for all of them and then one for each individual interview. One the individual pages I add a column for codes. Right now, I am just summarizing each quote more than finding consistent codes. Then I will try to code them and write a case

analysis for each interview, so I can send it to the participants for member checking. I want to make sure I interpret their thoughts correctly, before I start interweaving all of the interviews together to look for themes. I set it up in my proposal to do it this way- case analysis of each interview, followed by cross-case analysis of each interview question across interviews.

12/7

I am now working on a written summary for each interview. I have completed five of those and sent them on for member checking. A nice part of writing the summaries is they are also giving me a chance to look over the data and my initial codes again. Each summary has a brief paragraph on the background of participant and then each interview question with a paragraph of their response and bullets of the main points from the paragraph. I have had two people respond to their summary saying I captured their thoughts perfectly, which is great news so far! Once I have them all done (working on number 6 now) I will pull together the summaries and initial codes to start the cross-case analysis and determine the themes that go with each of my research questions. I am seeing some similarities between interviews as I am going already, so I cannot wait for this part.

12/14

The participants who responded to the member check have said that I captured their thoughts well, which is encouraging. I am now going to start pulling together the interviews to find the common themes for the interview and research questions. I am looking forward to this part, because up to this point, I have been looking at each interview as an individual case. I have a general sense of where there is definitely overlapping themes, but feel like I am just about on the verge of pulling out the main overarching themes for each research question.

Appendix J: Project Evaluation Survey

Thank you for attending the presentation of the white paper titled "Community, Completion, and Success: Online Program Recommendations for Adult Learners". Please help me evaluate the presentation of paper by completing a short eight-question survey. It should take you less than five minutes to complete.

For each question, choose the number that best reflects your thoughts.

1 = No   2 = Somewhat   3 = Yes, definitely

The white paper presentation was interesting.	1	2	3
The venue and scheduling of the presentation was adequate.	1	2	3
The white paper presentation was relevant to the mission and vision of the college	1	2	3
The presenter was knowledgeable of the topic	1	2	3
I learned more about the significance of the problem of online course completion for our local area.	1	2	3
I learned more about the theory, research, and practices that relate to online course completion.	1	2	3
I learned more about ways to address the problem of online course completion.	1	2	3
I believe the college should implement some of the recommended solutions presented in the white paper.	1	2	3