

2019

# Perceptions of Persistence in a Community College English Composition Class

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Starr Watson

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2019

Abstract

Perceptions of Persistence in a Community College English Composition Class

by

Starr Watson

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2019

## Abstract

The purpose of this bounded qualitative case study was to explore students' perceptions of factors that influenced their success or failure in an online English composition course at a community college located in the southeastern United States and to understand how these factors affected their persistence in coursework. Retention rates in online for online English composition courses are lower compared to face-to-face English composition courses. Rapid expansion of online learning has led to increased concern regarding student persistence in courses and degree or certification completion. Tinto's interactionist theory and Kember's model of student success framed the course of inquiry for this study. Eight online student volunteers, who completed, failed, or withdrew from a required entry-level English composition course, were purposefully selected and individually interviewed using a semistructured format. Data were thematically analyzed using open and pattern coding strategies and related to the conceptual framework. Key results revealed student perceptions of factors that influenced their success or failure in an online English composition course and suggested a change in pedagogical practices to improve persistence as well as institutional and instructional practices. Based on findings from this study, a white paper was drafted to present stakeholders with a 2-pronged approach to improve student persistence featuring faculty-student engagement and meaningful action and reflection on student learning experiences in an online English composition course. This study contributes to social change by presenting a pedagogical shift to address a persistence problem in online English composition courses. Persistence to course completion can build students' confidence and keep them on a path to achieving their academic goals.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my late husband and sister. Both encouraged me to pursue this journey and their inspiration still resonates within me.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my family and dear friends for their continued support throughout this journey. I am especially grateful to my chair, Dr. Shannon Decker who encouraged me to complete the journey.

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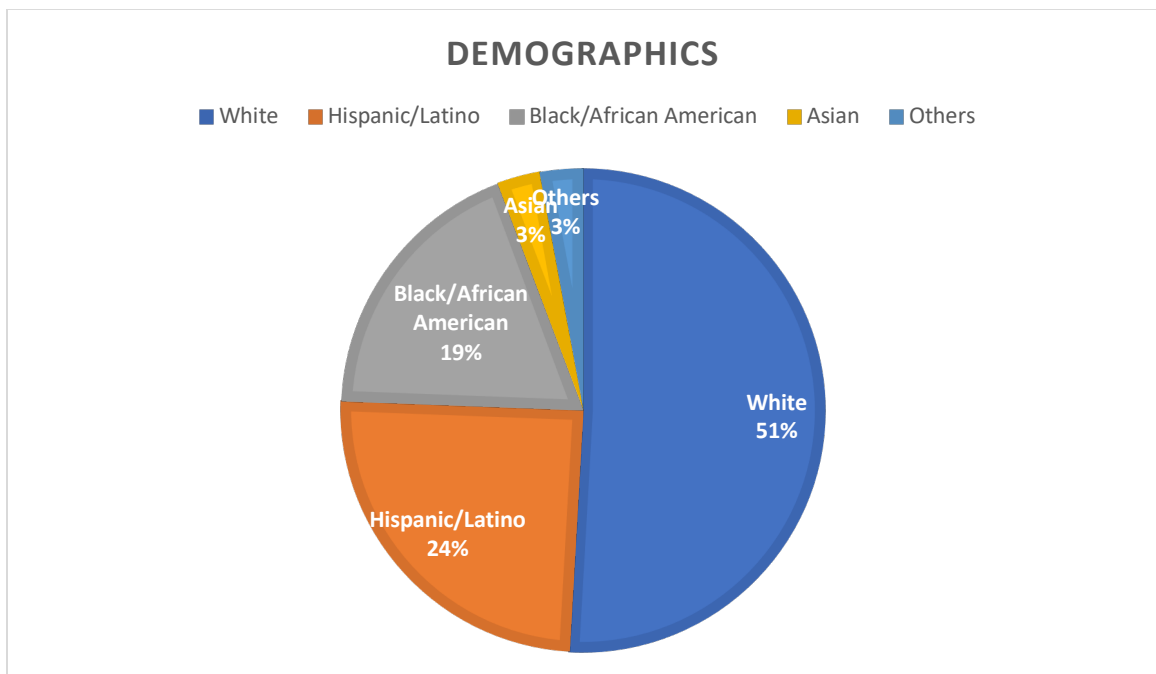
## Section 1: The Problem

### **The Local Problem**

A Community College (ACC [pseudonym]) is a multicampus community college with six locations serving approximately 44,000 students. The college offers associate of arts degrees, which allows students who successfully complete the program to transfer as juniors to a 4-year college, university, or private institution. ACC also offers technical and professional programs leading to associate of science degrees and associate in applied sciences degrees. There are technical programs available for students pursuing technical careers or careers as paraprofessionals.

The campus I recruited participants from services 5,856 students, representing a diverse population of students: White (50.9%), Hispanic/Latino (24.7%), Black/African American (18.7%), Asian (2.9%), and fewer than 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2015a)(Figure 1). Additional data gleaned from NCES showed ages ranging from 16 to 81, and the mean age was 26.1; 28,216 students were registered for distance learning (DL) from the six campuses. ACC's online enrollment increased in the last 5 years by 11,361 students representing an increase of approximately 40% (NCES, 2015a). Despite the growth rates for online learners, ACC experienced a lower completion rate for students taking English composition expository writing rather than on campus. From spring 2014 through the summer 2015 terms, dropout rates for online students averaged 5% higher than traditional students. English composition experienced high enrollment due to program requirements at the associate degree level. Students were required to pass this class with a C or higher to progress to the next required English composition course.

As indicated in data from 2014–2015, the failure rate of online students averaged 8% higher than that of traditional students. Thus, in English Composition, an average of 5% more online students dropped the course than on-campus students, and at least 8% of online students failed the course. This represented 13% of the online population who did not complete English composition. Students could not earn an associate degree without passing English composition and other required writing-intensive courses. Students who dropped out or did not pass this course delayed degree completion or lost motivation and departed from the institution rather than repeat the course or participate in remedial coursework.



*Figure 1.* Demographic information for ACC.

This persistence problem for students in online English composition was compounded by the absence of methods to assess persistence for an early identification of students at risk of dropping out or not passing the course (Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012; Hart, 2014), which threatened their ability to obtain a degree. By identifying the

reported success factors as well as problems and barriers for noncompleters among online students at ACC, the information added a new dimension for administrators, course designers, and faculty to build an online environment that supported students through completion of a course and eventual completion of a program or degree. To promote persistence, this study helped close the pedagogical gap by exploring both successful and noncompleter student experiences and identified successes and barriers specifically associated with English Composition.

ACC documents student retention rates, but there had not been a study conducted at this institution that examined why some students persisted in online English composition while other students failed to persist. Because the principal problem was student persistence in an online course, I focused on identifying factors that described both students who did not persist and students who did persist for the completion of a course that determined their future success. Attaining a college or advanced degree has become increasingly important for financial security; therefore, understanding the factors that helped or hindered college students to persist toward degree completion successfully is vital for all institutional stakeholders (Witkow, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2015). Because this study included interviews with both successful course completers and noncompleters, both groups provided insight into personal experiences that helped or hindered their persistence. Hence, I chose a qualitative approach. The use of a qualitative method allows for the collection of rich and thick data (Creswell, 2012), which provides a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants (Yin, 2014), which a quantitative approach would not.

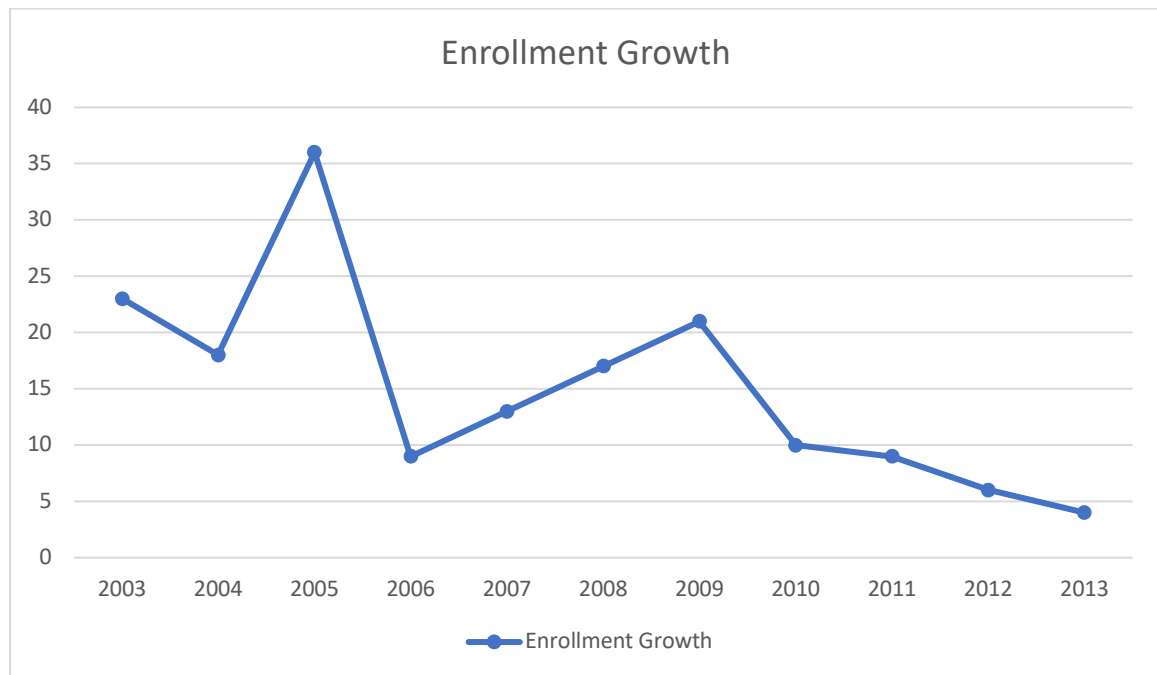


## **Rationale**

Researchers provide evidence of what was known and offer new insights about the current evidence and suggest what may lie ahead for applying the new knowledge (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, & Tamim, 2011). Thus, data gleaned from research studies are valuable to all institutional stakeholders, such as administrators, faculty, support staff, and learners, especially in a community where online learning had increased by 67% in the last 5 years. The rapid expansion of online learning has led to increased concern regarding student persistence in courses and degree or certification completion. Allen and Seaman (2014) reported that 44.6% of academic leaders in higher education were concerned about the mounting problem of retention of online students. Online students vary significantly from traditional students, and it is essential for academic leaders to understand why students persist or fail to persist in online courses. Disseminating data from research studies like this one is vital for educational leaders to continue improving programs that enhance student persistence.

Faculty and support staff also benefit from research regarding persistence in higher learning. Theories and research-based strategies to minimize attrition are provided to practitioners in the literature. Thus, the vast amount of research has been essential for practitioners to stay current and successfully meet the needs of the rising online population. Since 2003, Allen and Seaman (2015) have noted the rapid expansion of online learning. Online learning grew as much as 20% in the years 2003, 2005, and 2009. However, recent years have seen a moderate growth pattern with overall enrollment increases of 1.2% from 2012 to 2013, but a 4% increase in first-time online course enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Figure 2 shows the first-time online course

enrollment growth from 2003 to 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Despite online course expansion, an increasing concern nationally for dropout rates in online courses was demonstrated (Allen & Seaman, 2015). For instance, University of Phoenix, one of the largest private providers, reported only a 20% graduation rate for distance learning programs (Open Education Database, n.d.). International studies in higher education reflected similar graduation data. Internationally, Simpson (2013) compared graduation rates for distance institutions in the United Kingdom, Canada, Netherlands, India, and South Africa to conventional institutions in the United Kingdom. Simpson (2013) found a 5% to 20% graduation rate for distance learning compared to 80% for full-time education in the United Kingdom.



*Figure 2.* Enrollment growth in first-time online courses, from 2003 to 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

Colleges and universities have been confronted with the mission of continued matriculation of students in online programs from admission to completion (Canty,

Goldberg, Ziebell, & Ceperkovic, 2014; Gazza & Hunker, 2014). The Babson Survey reported increasing numbers of academic leaders, 44.6% in 2014 versus 27.2% in 2004, believed that “retaining online students was a rising problem more than retaining face-to-face courses” (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 6). Furthermore, 70.8% of academic leaders surveyed recognized the importance of online learning for an institution’s strategy in the long term (Allen & Seaman, 2015) because it provides another avenue for individuals to obtain a degree who previously could not due to geographic location, transportation, or scheduling issues.

Officials have spent billions of taxpayers’ dollars through federal and state programs in an attempt to support students pursuing degrees that they would inevitably fail to earn because they dropped out of the institutions (Kirshtein & Wellman, 2012; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014). State officials have spent large sums of money on students who dropped out, and these dropouts have cost states millions of dollars in lost tax revenue (Kirshtein & Wellman, 2012). The NCES (2015b) reported that college-degreed adults earned more than adults with some or no college. Young adults with a bachelor’s degree had annual median earnings of \$50,000, compared with \$23,900 for those without a high school credential, \$30,000 for adults with a high school credential, and \$37,500 for those who held an associate degree (NCES, 2015b). Young adults with a master’s degree or higher had annual median earnings of \$59,600 (NCES, 2015b). States also prospered from a degreed adult population with higher earnings by being able to collect higher revenue from adults in better paying positions. Unfortunately, when students failed to be persistent in the realization of their academic goals, many other institutional stakeholders were affected.

Gazza and Hunker (2014) reinforced the notion that persistence in online courses was a problem. For example, they addressed concepts related to retention and acknowledged 69 factors that influenced a student's decision to drop an online course. These factors were organized as "student factors, course/program factors, and environmental factors" (Gazza & Hunker, 2014, p. 1126). The three aforementioned main factor categories have often been highlighted when exploring a person's ability to persist with any task.

Student factors included: (a) academic aptitude, (b) academic performance, (c) management and technology skills, (d) experience in online courses, (e) self-efficacy, (f) internal locus of control, and (g) course satisfaction (Gazza & Hunker, 2014). In other studies, several authors suggested that grade point average (GPA) was an important predictor of persistence and retention (Boston, Ice, & Burgess, 2012; Hachey et al., 2014; Rovai, 2003). Additional researchers supported the notion that GPA was correlated to course outcomes positively (Hachey et al., 2014; Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Meanwhile, Figlio, Rush, and Yin (2010) conducted a study in an economics course and found no difference in completion between face-to-face and online courses for students with a higher GPA.

Researchers have suggested that course/program factors also influence a student's decision to drop or persist in an online course. Included in this group were external factors that institutions can address to improve the online environment. These factors include: (a) course design, (b) student support, (c) student-faculty interaction, and (d) levels of participation (Canty et al., 2014). Lee and Choi (2011) emphasized the importance of online courses designed to engage learners by matching learning activities

to the needs of students. In addition, faculty and peer mentoring, as well as faculty responsiveness were factors associated with improved retention rates (Lee & Choi, 2011).

Finally, environmental factors have influenced students' decisions to persist or depart. Such environmental factors include: (a) work, (b) family responsibilities, (c) life challenges, and (d) unexpected events (Canty et al., 2014). Canty et al. (2014) noted that environmental factors had a significant influence on student dropout rates. Students were faced with a balancing act trying to manage work and school with daily responsibilities (Canty et al., 2014; Willging & Johnson, 2004).

In addition to factors of persistence, multiple barriers have caused students to drop out of online classes. Barriers limit students' satisfaction levels with online courses, and student satisfaction is a key factor for retention and persistence (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). So and Brush (2008) identified various examples of barriers to satisfaction. Assumptions made by faculty and course designers overestimated student abilities with technology and the curriculum for the course, creating technological barriers. Moreover, when some students transitioned from face-to-face instruction to online instruction, the course failed to address distance-learning issues and provide student support. For instance, students lacked the ability to organize and continue learning without the traditional social and physical cues that were usually provided with face-to-face environments. Lack of traditional support was a shortcoming for some online students. Self-regulation of time and energy put forth toward course completion was a problem for many students (Kuo, Walker, Schroder, & Belland, 2014). These barriers have been major contributors to the problem of persistence for some students enrolled in an online course.

## Definition of Terms

*Active learning pedagogies:* Methods of engaging students in their learning through meaningful action and reflection by the student regarding their learning experience (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

*Attrition:* The withdrawal from an online course for academic or other reasons (Hart, 2012).

*Distance education:* A method of instruction in which education takes place between two different parties in different places, using different forms of materials (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011). Distance education requires technology to span the distance between the student, the instructor, and the institution (Anderson & Linnell, 2009).

*Distance learning:* The geographical separation of instructors from their students that relies on the use of electronic communication, such as computers and the Internet, to deliver required coursework and instruction (Keegan, 2013).

*Drop out:* A student's decision to no longer take a course and cease all course-related activities (Marshall, Greenberg, & Machun, 2012). Dropping out is the opposite of persistence and is often interchangeable with attrition.

*Faculty engagement:* The instructors' "responsibility to connect the cognitive and social aspects of a course to its purposes through critical reflection, productive debate, and cocreation or common understandings" (Seaton & Schwier, 2014, p. 3). Instructors encourage an online environment of communication and involvement through active participation.

*Online course:* A means of instruction that delivers coursework materials and classroom discussions through computer mediated communication over the Internet (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Typically, face-to-face meetings between students and instructors do not occur (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

*Persistence:* A student's ability to finish a single course or program or to graduate (Hart, 2014). According to Nakajima, Dembo, and Mossler (2012), persistence is associated with a student's self-efficacy. Furthermore, industriousness has been associated with a student's ability to persist in an academic environment (Roberts, Lejuez, Krueger, Richards, & Hill, 2014). Nora and Snyder (2011) define *learner persistence* as when students repeatedly stay on track and complete a course or education program successfully; they further stress that learning persistence is critical to students accomplishing their educational goals. Stevenson (2013) emphasizes the importance for administration, faculty, and course designers to assess learners' persistence carefully because this information affords institutions direction for making "organizational decision-making and educational program management" (p. 25). For this study, students who completed English composition with a grade C or better were considered successful completers. Students who exited before completing the course or who did not pass the class with credit were considered noncompleters.

*Retention:* An institution measurement of students who stay in school or depart (Hagedorn, 2005). Hagedorn specified various types of retention: (a) institutional, (b) system, (c) within a major or discipline, or (d) within the course. Hagedorn presented institutional retention data that measured the percentage of students who remained enrolled in the same school from year to year and course retention data that measured the

percentage of students completing a class. Defining retention rates is far more complex than a simple dichotomous measurement reflecting the number of students who stayed in school or left. Institutional retention rates for this study were based on the federal definition of graduation rates for a community college, which included the “percentage of full-time, first-time, degree-seeking students who graduate” from a 2-year college within 3 years (Hagedorn, 2005, p. 94). Course retention was considered any student completing the class with a passing grade.

*Stakeholders:* “The groups or individuals who have an interest in the performance of the enterprise and how it uses its resources” (Gomez-Mejia & Balkan, 2012, p. 91). In my study, I defined institutional stakeholders as administrators, faculty, and support staff.

### **Significance of the Study**

The results of this study could guide institutional stakeholders to understand factors that enhance online learning and factors that hinder online learning. Tinto’s (1975) interactionist’s theory and Kember’s (1995) model of student progress defined measuring student success by degree completion. However, researchers started to expand definitions of academic success to include personal goal attainment and increasing job skills gained through long-term and short-term education programs offered at 2-year institutions. The current definition was noteworthy as it focused on evaluating students’ short-term success rates and measured students’ semester-to-semester persistence rates. This definition of success was also appropriately suited for community colleges that focus on 2-year and certificate programs.

Nakajima et al. (2012) described the social significance of degree attainment, especially for students at risk of noncompletion, such as low-income and first generation



to matriculate in postsecondary education. Furthermore, students reported an increased social interpersonal growth, which they attributed to earning a degree (Gurin, Dey, Huntado, & Gurin, 2002). In addition, students reported a greater sense of belonging and perceived a sense of social support that accompanied degree attainment (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Ferrins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). Hence, students who were successful persisters benefitted by expanding their educational qualifications, and postsecondary schools gained through tuition and grant revenue retention.

Students who drop out of college can incur substantial loan debt and fail to achieve their goals (Kahlenberg, 2015). Moreover, employment opportunities are not plentiful for workers without an education and there are definite disparities in economic levels between educated and non-educated workers (NCES, 2015b; Troste, 2010). Adults aged 25 to 34 who had a bachelor's degree and worked year-round, earned approximately 62% more than adults in that age range who only completed high school, and 29% more than an associate-degree holder (NCES, 2015). The pattern of higher earnings associated with higher educational levels held for both men and women and across racial and ethnic groups (NCES, 2015b). Avoidance of these problems may be significant for individuals and the communities their communities.

### **Research Question**

As reflected in the literature, online course attrition and dropout rates are 20% more than face-to-face courses. The problem in the local context was defined as low online retention rates for English composition at a small community-college campus. The low online retention rates not only affect students' ability to persist toward course completion in a timely manner but also delay students' degree completion and possibly

cause students to leave education never having achieved their educational goals. I used a qualitative approach and explored the problem in-depth.

In quantitative research, data are collected from a large group of people using preset questions and responses, whereas in qualitative research, participants have a voice and researchers explore their personal experiences associated with the problem to build a deeper understanding (Creswell, 2012; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The goal of this study was, through personal experiences of participants, to identify the factors in online learning that may have a positive or negative influence on students' persistence in coursework. Consequently, the research question constructed for this study was the following:

RQ1: What are community college completers' and noncompleters' perceptions of their persistence to complete requirements of an online English composition course?

### **Review of the Literature**

The review of the literature consisted of examining specific and related research studies, dissertations, scholarly articles, reports, internet websites, books, and other documents. The online databases I used in this literature review included EBSCO, ERIC, Education Research Complete, Education from SAGE, Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, Wilson ProQuest, and Academic Search Complete. I used different combinations of keywords to locate research studies: *online learning, distance learning, online course, persistence, retention, attrition, introductory composition, dropout, factors, perceived stress, significance, support, self-motivation, goal attainment, social connectedness, and barriers to persistence, qualitative, quantitative, and case study*. Included in this literature review are the sources I considered most relevant to the topic. I organized the

literature review by the broader problem, theoretical perspectives, theoretical framework in relation to this study, social connectedness, perceived stress and support, self-motivation, goal commitment, implications for research, implications for practice, and a closing summary.

### **Broader Problem**

Following the Great Depression and World War II, college enrollment surged during the 1950s. Returning soldiers' education was subsidized through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill. The Higher Education Act of 1965 also promoted education by providing financial assistance for students in postsecondary education through increased federal money given to universities, scholarships, low-interest loans for students, and establishing a National Teachers Corps. In addition, the civil rights movement was also influential in generating greater education opportunities for African Americans and other racial and cultural minority groups. However, students who were enrolling in institutions were not prepared for the academic and social demands of college, and institutions were not adequately prepared to help a diverse population attain degrees (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

Society was also becoming increasingly industrial and technologically oriented; high school degrees were no longer adequate for future economic and social attainment (Berger & Lyon, 2005). By the early 1970s, there were predictions of a decrease in enrollment and retention, which became a key focus for educators, researchers, and institutions (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

Higher education also expanded to include distance learning in the form of online education. Online learning provided convenience for working students, but while online

options helped to maintain high enrollment rates, persistence and completion rates among students were significantly lower than conventional education (Baxter, 2012).

Researchers continued to support a 20% higher attrition rate for online classes compared to face-to-face classes (Lee & Choi, 2013; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Soares, 2013). The research problem in this study focused on lower persistence rates for one English composition courses compared to the same traditional courses.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Spady (1971) presented a model for student retention that emphasized the interaction between student characteristics and campus environment. This seminal work was noteworthy because Spady merged empirical research into a conceptual framework grounded in sociology rather than psychology (Seidman, 2005). Tinto (1975) expanded on Spady's research to develop a model of attrition and persistence that addressed the problems students encountered when entering college and completing a degree. Tinto's (1975) model proposed that students entered college with predetermined characteristics, such as academic ability, gender, family background, and precollege experience, and these characteristics directly or indirectly influenced college performance and the level of students' institutional commitment. These characteristics also affected how students participated socially and academically in the college setting (Tinto, 1975). The interaction between individuals and the social and academic system caused students to constantly alter their goal and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1975). Over a period, students assessed their social and educational outcomes and decided to persist or dropout (Tinto, 1975). Not one, but a sequence of events, led to student persistence or dropout.

Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory became one of the best-known theories of student departure (Seidman, 2005). Tinto presented individual characteristics of new college students (i.e., academic ability, gender, family background, precollege experiences) and suggested these characteristics, along with a student's commitment to the institution and graduation, influenced student departure decisions. Tinto also maintained that these characteristics influenced students' institutional commitment and commitment to attaining a degree. In *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (1993), Tinto revised the model to recognize the importance of financial resources; connection with an external community such as family, friends, and/or work; and classroom experiences on a student's choice to persist or depart. Tinto's model demonstrated that students who could adjust and reach a degree of integration, both academically and socially, continued; whereas, those who failed to adjust dropped out (Kember, 1989).

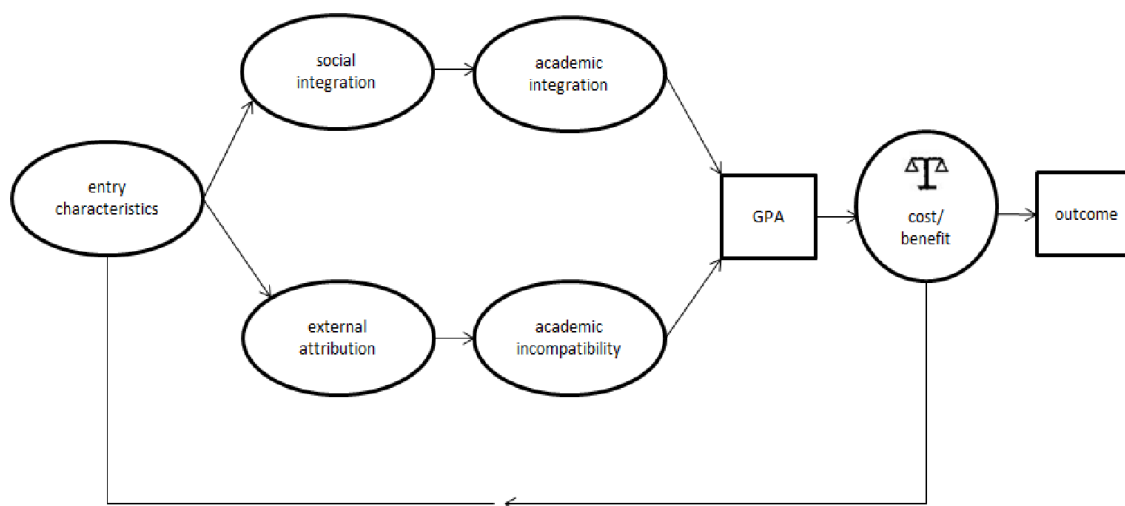
Recognizing that Tinto's (1975) model had limited application because it was developed for students on a college campus (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Nakajima et al., 2012; Rovai, 2003), Kember (1989) adapted Tinto's interactionist model to accommodate distance learners. Kember's model presented additional external factors, including family, friends, employment setting, financial condition, and social obligations. In this model, Kember also included goal commitment and intrinsic and extrinsic commitment. Kember's (1989) intrinsic characteristic referred to a student's complete interest in a topic and the extrinsic characteristic denoted a student's incentive to achieve a result or goal. Kember's model retained Tinto's longitudinal process, which meant each component influenced subsequent components in the model. For example, the first

component, which was student characteristics—such as family upbringing, educational background, current family, and work situation—influenced the succeeding component of student goal commitment (Kember, 1989). Kember acknowledged the many influences that affect a student’s successful persistence to graduation and proposed that a longitudinal process had the ability to delineate the effect on the student, institutional support, and whether the student had the time or capacity to study. A longitudinal process looked at the possible effect of institutional interventions and the student’s personal life, instead of simply correlating dropout numbers to a predetermined set of variables, which may not provide institutions with a complete picture of why some students persist and others do not.

Kember’s (1989) model of student progress focused first on student entry characteristics, which included individual characteristics, family and home, work, and educational characters. Researchers in distance learning demonstrated a correlation between persistence and student characteristics (Baxter, 2012; Hart, 2014; Jun, 2015; Lee & Choi, 2013; Patterson & McFadden, 2009). For example, Nakajima et al. (2012) sampled 427 community-college students to determine probable factors that contributed to a student’s decision to persist or drop out of school. Nakajima et al. (2012) used a 63-item survey to assess psychosocial variables, such as self-efficacy and goals; academic integration, such as student-faculty integration; and a number of background variables, such as demographic, financial, and academic. Student return enrollment was used to measure retention the following semester. Results of this study showed that cumulative GPA was the strongest predictor of student persistence, and other variables did not diminish its effect (Nakajima et al., 2012). Moreover, neither academic integration nor

psychosocial variables were predictors of student persistence. In addition, this study demonstrated that almost all the variables were interrelated. For instance, GPA was significantly related to goals and self-efficacy, which also predicted student persistence and faculty-student integration, which was related to enrollment units, which in turn also predicted student persistence (Nakajima et al., 2012, p. 591). Results from this study supported the importance of examining multiple factors when trying to unravel the mystery of persistence in higher education institutions (Nakajima et al., 2012).

According to Kember (1995), in his revised model, students encountered two different learning paths depending on their entry characteristics, such as gender, age, ethnicity, parental education, previous college credits, educational goals, children, marital status, income, and motivation. The positive path accentuated social and academic integration and had a greater achievement rate. The other accentuated outside qualities and academic discordancy that adversely affected successful achievement. Kember (1995) emphasized that each path influenced students' GPAs, leading to students' internal cost-benefit analysis that ultimately governed the outcome whether they dropped out or persisted.



*Figure 3.* Kember's model of student progress. Students' entry characteristics impact their choice of either a positive or a negative path, which ultimately governs their decision to remain or depart. Adapted from *Open Learning Courses for Adults: A Model of Student Progress*, by D. Kember (1995, p. 55). Reprinted with permission.

In Kember's model (1995), students who demonstrated less effectiveness to integrate academic needs with social interactions blamed their unsuccessful integration into school on external factors out of their control. The negative social integration aspects in the model were divided into distractions, unexpected events, and insufficient time (Kember, 1995).

Moore and Kearsley (2011) reported that academic integration, social integration, academic incompatibility, and external attribution were confirmed by factor analysis. After further testing, Kember asserted that the model helped draw conclusions and made predictions for application. Hart (2014) stressed that Kember's model of student success emphasized the complexities of persistence as distance learners tackled conflicting demands while incorporating schoolwork into domestic responsibilities, work, and friends. Since its inception, many researchers reviewed, assessed, referenced, and applied



Kember's (1995) model of student progress (DeLange & Mavondo, 2000; Hart, 2014; Woodley, DeLange, & Tanewski, 2001).

### **How Does the Theoretical Framework Relate to this Study?**

Kember's model of student progress (1995) was founded on the distance learning population. The model emphasized that student perceptions, experiences, and interactions in the online social and academic context affected online students' outcome.

Furthermore, persistence facilitators presented by Hart (2014) in a literature review aligned with Kember's student progress model. For instance, social connectedness was achieved through integration with other students and faculty in an online class (Mayne & Wu, 2011). In addition, Kember (1995) recognized the significant role student characteristics played in persistence and departure. Furthermore, the framework allowed for institutional action for variables that could be modified through effective programs that improved student persistence.

The goal of this study was through student voices to build a deeper understanding of the factors that influenced successful and unsuccessful course completers and how these factors affected persistence for both completers and non-completers in a community-college, English composition course. Hart (2014) completed an extensive literature review in which she found the following four constructs to persistence reoccurring in the literature: "social connectedness, perceived stress and support, self-motivation, and goal attachment" (p. 151). Although researchers considered the constructs distinct characteristics of persistence (Gaza & Hunker, 2014; Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Lee & Choi, 2013; Park & Choi, 2009), there was overlap in the findings (Gaza & Hunker, 2014). For instance, social presence supported retention;

however, perceived stress and support were related directly or indirectly to social presence, which also supported retention. In the literature review, I examined each construct and other identified facilitators of persistence and presented relevant findings.

### **Social Connectedness**

In studies evaluating social connectedness, researchers reported that persistent students were confident they could establish social relationships in online courses (Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Mayne & Wu, 2011; Park & Choi, 2011). Gazza and Hunker (2014) defined social connectedness as the friendship and rapport a student developed toward other students and faculty in the course. Kemp (2002) conducted a study on resiliency and findings indicated that students with strong work commitments had a strong correlation to persistence in higher education. Delahunty, Verenikina, and Jones (2014) suggested students who have strong social connections with peers were able to gain support and reinforcement, which improved persistence in online courses. Persistent students were confident in navigating discussion-based structures in online courses; whereas, students who did not persist were less confident with this environment (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Furthermore, students who were comfortable in a virtual community had a greater likelihood to be the persistent students (Ivankova & Stick, 2007).

Social connectedness, which included student and faculty interaction, was an important component to quality online courses (Mayne & Wu, 2011; Park & Choi, 2011; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Gazza and Hunker (2014) conducted an online study that included 26 nursing students and concluded that students who experienced group interaction and a sense of social connectedness felt that their online learning needs were

being met and they were likely to persist. Avery, Cohen, and Walker (2008) conducted a study using a researcher-designed tool, nursing faculty and a technology specialist to evaluate 16 courses for quality standards in online courses. The researchers identified support and student voice among the four final themes that were crucial for student success (Avery et al., 2008). Rovai and Downey (2010) and Lee and Choi (2011) also stressed the need for both academic and social support that would benefit students in online courses by emphasizing that students experienced segregation because of the physical separation from the institution and lack of face-to-face communication with faculty and support systems. Hence, scholars reinforced the importance for students to experience personalized connections with faculty and other students to avoid feelings of isolation (Lee & Choi, 2011).

In contrast, Swayze and Jakeman (2014) conducted a qualitative study focused on the merger of two cohorts of doctoral students to study the learning experiences and active communication within the larger group. The researchers found that the students in the merged course were less interactive in the new classroom environment. Swayze and Jakeman (2014) concluded that merging student cohorts with previously established group norms changed the course structure and presented a challenge for educators.

### **Perceived Stress and Support**

I explored studies that documented the significance of family, friends and institutional support to promote student persistence (Park & Choi, 2009; Reason, 2009). There were many external factors that affected student participation and influenced a student's choice to persist or drop out (Park & Choi, 2009; Reason, 2009). Factors included, but were not limited to, family issues, financial stress, time constraints, and

workplace pressures (Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Community-college students also differed from traditional students. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) offered educational opportunities to minority, low income, and first-generation postsecondary education students (Hachey et al., 2015). The average age of the community college student was 29 and more than half of the students were women. In addition, roughly two-thirds of students at community colleges were enrolled part time. Community colleges appealed to the students who were advancing skills or planning to complete their degree by transferring to a 4-year institution (AACC, 2016). Hence, it was important for institutions to have effective support programs that addressed the diverse needs of the online population and used research-based solutions to facilitate student retention (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011; Lee, Trail, Lewis, & Lopez, 2011).

A study conducted by Wilcoxson, Cotter, and Joy (2011) examined retention factors at six universities in Australia over a span of three years in a business program. The researchers revealed that issues associated with intent to dropout from an institution vary by the year of study and demographics of specific universities. For instance, researchers showed that first-year students were primarily concerned with instructors/professors, teaching techniques, and administration responsiveness to specific concerns within the student population. Student involvement in the university was less significant to retention than were “commitment, expectations, support, and feedback” (Wilcoxson et al., 2011, p. 343). Whereas, second-year students were more comfortable with college expectations, focused more on their personal responsibilities to the institution, and still required quality learning-support from faculty and staff (Wilcoxson et al., 2011). The relationship between institutional support and student intent to leave

was further accentuated by research from this study. Moreover, the researchers validated the importance of individualized institutional support programs (Wilcoxson et al., 2011) because significant differences existed across both groups regarding the perceptions of support they received from family, as well as the work organization, which were also comprised of motivational factors such as satisfaction and course relevance. Furthermore, Park and Choi (2009) found that these four variables were also “able to predict dropouts and persistent learners at a Midwestern university at a rate of 89.8%” (p. 214). In their study, Park and Choi (2009) found organizational support and relevance to have the highest predictability values. This study reinforced the need for students to have support from family, employer, and institution throughout course completion. Findings also underscored the importance of courses designed to meet “unique needs” (Park & Choi, 2009, p. 214) of learners. This study reinforced the crucial need for students to have support from family, employer, and institution throughout course completion. Findings also underscored the importance of courses designed to meet “unique needs” (Park & Choi, 2009, p. 214) of learners.

On the other hand, not only was it important for institutions to have tangible support for students, it was also imperative that institutions provided faculty and staff the necessary support needed to accommodate learners (Diemer, Fernandez, & Streepey, 2012). For instance, students and faculty in higher education used instructional technology such as text and instant messaging extensively for academic purposes (Lauricella & Kay, 2013). This approach established faculty-student and student-student relationships that served to reduce stress and improved support in the learning environment. However, this method was not familiar to some instructors who lacked the

expertise required for this type of communication (Lauricella & Kay, 2013). Because it was determined to what degree technology boosts student commitment and learning, institutions needed to explore with faculty and staff the benefits and problems associated with the use of technical devices and provided further support to personnel (Diemer et al., 2012).

### **Self-Motivation**

Motivation was an additional factor associated with persistence (Boston et al., 2012; Hart, 2014). Vanthournout, Gijbels, Coertjens, Donche, and VanPetegem (2012) conducted a study to determine “whether students’ learning strategies and academic motivation [predicted] persistence and academic success in the first year of higher education” (p. 1). Questioning freshman in a bachelor’s degree, teacher’s education program, at the start and conclusion of the academic year, Vanthournout et al. (2012) found the effect of “academic motivation on persistence and academic success” (p. 1) was an important motivational predictor of persistence. In a pilot test (Visser, Plomp, Amirault, & Kuiper, 2002), lecturers delivered continual motivational messages to online learners. The results of this study showed an improvement in student satisfaction and an increase in student course completion. Additionally, researchers suggested a higher interactive learning environment enhanced student motivation, improved learning outcomes, and increased student satisfaction (Espasa & Meneses, 2010; Park & Choi, 2009). Courses that involved a high level of student engagement and interaction were frequently influenced by instructional design choices, which vary by course or department within a single institution (Street, 2010). Hence, additional research was

needed to explore specific course factors that promoted online student persistence (Street, 2010).

Providing a different view on self-motivation and goal setting was a study conducted by Walton, Cohen, Cwir, and Spencer (2012). Because past researchers did not test whether a person could internalize the motivation of others, Walton et al. (2012) conducted a study to determine if the effects of a minimal social connection to an unfamiliar person could increase motivation and encourage others to create “socially shared goals around a performance task” (p. 513). Findings from this study showed when participants were teamed according to a specific social link (e.g., shared birthdays), participants were more motivated to work harder to complete the task and achieve a goal together. Hence, results from this study supported the notion that people can take on the motivation and goals of others, working harder and performing better as a team. This information was important for course designers and faculty to assist in creating an academic environment that will keep students motivated and engaged.

### **Goal Commitment**

Goal commitment was identified as a component of persistence (Hart, 2012). Locke and Latham (1990) described goal commitment as a person’s willpower to achieve a specific goal. Although goal commitment was a compelling motivator that kept a student focused, related factors such as self-efficacy, determination, and personal tenacity contributed to student goal attainment (Hart, 2012). D’lima, Winsler, and Kitsantas (2014) completed a quantitative study that examined student goal orientation, self-efficacy, and extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of first-year college students of ethnic and gender differences. Through the results they revealed, “female students were more

extrinsically motivated and mastery-oriented than male students” (p. 341). Men were found to be more performance oriented (D’lima et al., 2014). This information could be valuable to course designers and practitioners as they worked to design and deliver course materials that focused on student goals. Cleveland-Innes (1994) found that not only did academic integration influence traditional student dropout, but academic integration also influenced commitment, which affected adult student dropout. In an effort to identify important factors of persistence, Davidson and Holbrook (2014) conducted a study to measure persistence rates of undergraduate students at 4-year traditional institutions from Spring 2006 to Fall 2006. Additionally, the study measured degree completion between Fall 2005 through Spring 2012. The outcome of the study showed that there was a correlation between the number of attempted and completed credit hours and this was a strong indicator of student retention and graduation rates. Findings emphasized the goal was for students to earn credits in all their courses the first year to increase student retention. Furthermore, the study stressed the need for academic counselors and support for adult students to attain this goal (Davidson & Holbrook, 2014).

Supporting a different point of view toward goal attainment was a study conducted by Mannarini and Talo (2011) to determine if activists’ commitment to the goals of a group/organization influenced persistence. A sample of 278 high school graduates and college students from various community organizations were surveyed. Although findings supported commitment to a goal as an antecedent to persistence, results from the study demonstrated that commitment to the group goal weakens as stress levels increased and comfort levels of the individual roles in the organization changed.



Thus, the conclusions drawn from Mannarini and Talo's (2011) research suggested first that group relationships do have conflicts. Second, support systems such as individual and group coping strategies as well as external support are necessary to sustain engagement. Finally, monitoring of group structures and activities were necessary to enhance the needs of all group members and continued encouraging sustainable engagement.

### **Implications**

#### **For Research**

Research data confirmed that online learning has become a major instructional modality in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Croxton, 2014). Yet persistence rates for online courses remain lower than the traditional face-to-face course (Giesbers, Rienties, Tempelaar, & Gijsselaers, 2013; Wladis et al., 2015). Croxton (2014) contended that there were external, internal, and contextual factors that influenced student persistence and attrition. Furthermore, Nakajima et al. (2012) argued that variables were interrelated, and when students dropped out, it was the result of several interrelated variables. For example, ethnicity was considered a persistence variable; however, ethnicity was associated with low socioeconomic status, lower GPA, or other factors making it difficult to analyze the effect of an individual variable (Nakajima et al., 2012). Continued research plays a vital role in addressing issues directly associated with persistence and degree completion. The goal of this research study was to build a deeper understanding of factors that influenced successful and unsuccessful persistence in an online required English composition course.

The data derived from my study will help guide the project development. Thus far, I have presented research that aligns with Kember's theoretical framework emphasizing student perceptions, experiences, and interactions in the online social and academic environment and how this affects online students' outcome. Furthermore, Hart (2014) presented persistence facilitators from a literature review and identified studies that suggested greater interaction between student-teacher and student-student to improve pedagogy. Research findings can be presented as a project in the form of a white paper and disseminated to all institutional stockholders. Data collection and analysis from this study helped guide the project development resulting in a student persistence analysis in the form of a white paper. Furthermore, the white paper project can guide stakeholders to make informed decisions regarding improving online pedagogy by developing and implementing new pedagogies to promote student success and persistence.

### **For Practice**

Through studies like this, findings provide educators' information and suggestions from course completers and non-completers that improved their online course delivery. The project deliverable developed through the findings of the research. Data from this study were collected from conversations with students who completed or did not complete an online English composition course. As a result, pedagogy has been identified and a new approach can be implemented to promote student success and persistence. For a clearer understanding of online factors that influence student persistence and improve pedagogies, I will present the white paper to institutional stakeholders.

## Summary

The theoretical perspective of Kember's (1995) model of student progress guided this study. Kember's model was designed for the distance learner population and the framework correlated with the four main constructs of persistence: social connectedness, perceived stress and support, self-motivation, and goal attainment (Hart, 2014). Hart found these facilitators of persistence to be reoccurring themes in the literature. Moreover, these variables, although interrelated, could be modified through effective persistence policies and programs. Research for each construct was presented with emphasis on understanding persistence from the student's view and how institutions supported student persistence through evidence-based strategies. The literature review closed with implications for both research and practice.

In Section 2, I explained the methodology used for this study, which included the research design and approach, criteria for selecting a sample, procedures and safeguards, data collection and analysis. I presented the project in Section 3, and in Section 4, I included a reflection of the research study process.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Qualitative Research Design and Approach**

For this study, I employed a qualitative research design. The three basic research methods are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Tracy, 2013). To identify the most appropriate research method for this study, I determined the design that best aligned with the research questions. The quantitative methodology relies on hypothesis testing and the identification of variables (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2013). Numerous quantitative studies have provided information regarding outcome data (grade reports) as related to student persistence in general education, but identifying the factors influencing persistence in online learning continued to be a problem (Park & Choi, 2009; Vaughn, Andre, & Mort, 2015). The nature of qualitative research, however, is inductive because results emerge from the data instead of hypothesis testing. Thus, I examined the issue of persistence in an online learning setting through the voices of students who are or had been enrolled in online learning. Qualitative methods relied on interpretive techniques that translated, decoded, or described the meaning of a social phenomenon (Cooper, Schindler, & Sun, 2013). I used semistructured interviews to document students' perceptions and experiences to identify the factors they felt influenced their persistence or nonpersistence in online English composition. The semistructured interview format allowed me to explore deeper as students discussed their personal experiences, adding further dimension to the study.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not aim to measure specific numeric variables but instead relies on researcher interpretations (Bansal & Corley, 2011; Birkinshaw, 2011). A qualitative design is suited for studies in which the researcher

intends to explore a complex issue that cannot be measured quantitatively (Tracy, 2013). Furthermore, this study was an in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences in a specific instructional context and used the student experience as a unit of measurement (Tracy, 2013). An experimental design was not deemed appropriate because no treatment was required to answer the research questions.

Narrative analysis is when a researcher seeks out participants' stories, which serve a variety of purposes. People employ stories to share information, convey knowledge, describe experiences, and explain history. The terminology used to describe narrative inquiry studies includes *biography*, *oral history*, *life story*, and *autoethnography* (Merriam & Tisdale, 2014). Researchers have used narrative analysis to explore chronologically arranged material from participants in order to understand their lives (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The three dimensions of narrative analysis include "temporality, sociality, and place" (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 479). I did not select narrative analysis because the research question was focused on a specific phenomenon rather than a story.

Grounded theory is when researchers use qualitative methods to gather information about a research question and explore the elements that make up that experience (Tracy, 2013). From a constant examination and re-examination of past and present data, working in an inductive manner, theories emerge from the data and provide an explanation of the nature of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The theory arose in an inductive manner from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as I focused on learning about the experiences of the students and did not create an independent theory; thus, grounded theory was not an applicable research method.

Researchers employ ethnography to explore a culture or specific groups. They focus on areas of interest such as rituals, language, and relationships (Tracy, 2013). When conducting an ethnographic study, researchers often become members of the group under study and act as observer, participant, and interviewer (Tracy, 2013). As the research question here was not embedded in cultural understanding, ethnography was not an appropriate method of inquiry.

Case study methodology is used to understand complex phenomena in context (Yin, 2014). Through the process of asking open-ended interview questions, a researcher can obtain the data from respondents in their own words. The methods used in collecting data and focusing on the context and conditions of the lived experiences of the respondents allow researchers to separate themselves from the actual experience of those being interviewed. A researcher cannot manipulate or determine the range of responses in advance. Case-study design is based on the constructivist theoretical tradition that reality is socially constructed (Yin, 2014). Through the process of analyzing the collected responses, a researcher can deconstruct and then reconstruct the experiences reported to derive deeper understanding. Because of these factors, I chose the case study method for this research.

The goals of this project were to inform institutional stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, and support staff, about current local online persistence to EC course completion rates and provide alternative research-based pedagogies to improve online retention. I created an institutional stakeholders' survey (Appendix A) to administer to all participating institutional stakeholders after presenting this project. The white paper project presented positive and negative factors influencing student

persistence in online courses and offered a solution through research-based practices specific to online learning. After presenting the project to stakeholders, I will request that all institutional stakeholders complete the survey (Appendix A) to determine if the project goals were clearly understood and to attain feedback from the audience regarding collaboration.

### **Participants**

This study was conducted at one of six campuses, which was part of a larger community college in the southeastern United States. Enrollment for the 2013–2014 academic year was 15,705 students. Of those enrolled, 4,475 students, approximately one in three students, were enrolled in one or more online classes. The 2012 12-month enrollment report indicated that 66% of the students at the institution were part-time students, and 68% of the students were 24 years of age or younger (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Because the central phenomenon under study was to identify the factors that influence successful and nonsuccessful completion of an online English composition course, the criteria for the sample population were ACC students currently registered in online English composition, students in the current school year who had successfully completed the class in which success was defined as achieving a grade of “C” or higher, and students who had dropped the course in the current school year. I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants for the study. The use of purposeful sampling stemmed from the need to access participants who had experience and knowledge of the central phenomenon being studied (Benoot, Hannes, & Bilsen, 2016). In recruiting interview participants, I made effort to select respondents in a systematic way from class

enrollment lists. I contacted classroom instructors via email asking them to send the letter to potential participants, including their current students, students from the previous semester, and students who had dropped the course in the current school year.

Generally, sample sizes in qualitative studies tend to be much smaller than those found in quantitative studies. The main criteria require to complete a sample for a qualitative study is saturation. Saturation is defined as the point at which adding novel participants to the study process will not add new data or enrich existing data (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Tracy, 2013). I reviewed many guidelines offering suggestions on how to determine sample size. Tracy (2013) reported that five to eight participants in a qualitative study would provide a researcher a plethora of information. Morse (1999) suggested that the minimum number of participants for a qualitative study was six. Creswell (2012) indicated that the sample size for a qualitative study could range from five to 25. Based on these numbers, I selected a sample size of eight to 12.

## **Data Collection**

### **Instrumentation and Materials**

When conducting qualitative inquiries, the researcher is the essential element and is involved in all aspects of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). To be effective, a researcher must possess skills that include active listening, careful observation, and a willingness to probe responses (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). Using qualitative interviewing enables a researcher to examine a case they may not have experienced, and through gathering and analyzing a series of interviews, a picture of the persistence problem can be uncovered (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).



The primary instrument in this study was a semistructured, open-ended interview protocol (Appendix B) created to guide the interview to ensure the participants were asked an identical series of open-ended questions, keeping the interviews focused on the phenomenon under study (Turner, 2010). This interview format allowed the participants to speak in depth about phenomenon and aided in the capture of rich and thick data (Tracy, 2013). I used follow-up probes such as “Can you tell me more,” “How did that feel,” and “What did you think about...” to encourage detailed responses (Turner, 2010). Although the data can be extensive, making it more challenging to analyze, thick and rich data also aids in the reduction of researcher bias because of the depth and breadth of analysis required (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

The interview questions arose from the research question, related literature, and Kember’s (1995) model of student progress, which guided the study. Appropriate interview questions need to be free of jargon, nonleading, and easy to understand (Tracy, 2013). These questions enabled students who have experienced the English composition class to provide different perspectives that may challenge the assumptions of the case study (Yin, 2014) and gave the participants an opportunity to expound in detail and depth about the experience (Houghton, Dympna, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013).

I employed three other instruments to gather data for this study. I created a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix C) and a participant observation sheet (Appendix D). I used the demographic questionnaire to gather baseline demographic data including age, gender, race, year in school, major, and employment status. Information gathered using a demographic questionnaire enables a researcher to analyze the data and search for emerging patterns based on demographic factors (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). I used the

observational data sheet to write down any notes or observations during the interview that were indicative of the participants' experiences or perceptions thereof (Hirst & Altman, 2012). Notes were specifically included for the indication of nonverbal cues, gestures, vocal tones, specific noteworthy words or phrases, and any other applicable information. I also kept a field journal that aided in the creation of an audit trail by recording all steps, actions, thoughts, and analysis that occurred during the study (Lofland & Lofland, 1999).

### **Pilot Interview**

A pilot interview is the pretesting of a research instrument and an important element of rigorous study design (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). A pilot study is used to assess the instrument, train the interviewer in the use of the instrument, reword questions, measure the time necessary to complete the instrument, and discard any unnecessary questions (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). I conducted a pilot study with three participants to assess my open-ended interview guide, the demographic survey, and the observational data sheet. I also tested the recorder and used the time to gain confidence with the interview process. I interviewed students who had completed English composition. Once each interview was completed, I sought comments and suggestions for improvement from the interviewee. Following each pilot interview, I carefully reflected on the effectiveness of the practice interview to denote areas in which I probed for deeper explanations and places I could have encouraged greater in-depth discussion. I noted these reflections in my field note log.

### **Study Data Collection**

Data collection in the study followed four main steps: (a) initial contact with instructors and request to contact potential participants, (b) contact with students who

wish to participate in the study to schedule interviews and determine method of interviewing (i.e., telephone or in person), (c) interviews either on the phone or in person, and (d) transcription of interviews into textual data. Data were filed into specific sources in NVivo and each participant was assigned to a mutually exclusive source. This organizational method allowed all data to be traced back to the de-identified participant who provided it.

The research site did not have an Institutional Review Board. I conducted my study with the college president's permission. In the first stage of data collection, all online English instructors were sent an email that contained information about the study. The information included an invitation to participate, the title of the study, a brief description about the study, selection criteria, and my contact information. Because I was not an instructor at the college and did not have student contact information, the online English instructors were asked to forward the invitation to current students and include students who had withdrawn from the course. Online instructors were asked to forward the invitation or send me email addresses of any students who had completed the English course or withdrawn during the current school year (2016–2017).

In the second stage of data collection, participants who responded to the invitation were contacted through email initially to discuss the study details and requirements. I contacted the students using their preferred method of contact that they indicated in their response and described the study in greater detail. All potential participants were informed that they were free to leave the study at any time and for any reason with no repercussions. No incentives or compensation were offered for participation in the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The study requirements and informed consent were

discussed, and I discussed the participant's willingness to participate in the study. Students were then asked whether they preferred to take part in an in-person or a telephone interview.

For students who wished to participate in an in-person interview, I arranged a meeting to conduct the interview. Selection criteria for an appropriate location included privacy, comfort, ease of access, and an ability to speak without interruption. In-person interviewing was the preferred method of interviewing for the study because it would allow the researcher to gather data such as a participant's body language, and to measure their understanding of questions based on their expressions (Tracy, 2013). For in-person interviews, the participants were presented the informed consent form at the mutually agreed upon time and place and asked if they had any questions regarding their role in the research. If participants had any questions, I provided any details necessary until they were comfortable and fully understood their role as a participant. If they had no questions, they were asked to sign the informed consent and then given the demographic questionnaire to complete on paper. Once the demographic questionnaire was completed, the interview commenced. These interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission, as indicated on the informed consent form.

If the student chose to be interviewed over the telephone, I requested a telephone number that was best to use and a time for the interview to take place. For these interviews, I sent the consent form to participants via email and requested that participants sign the informed consent and complete the demographic survey. Participants who were interviewed via telephone scanned and emailed or mailed the completed forms to me before the interview commenced. I requested that participants choose a location to

receive the interview call that was private and free of distraction. Although interviewing in person is usually considered the preferred manner of gathering data, interviewing via phone is also useful (Tracy, 2013). Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated that using telephone interviews enables a researcher to save time and money and can be necessary to reach people who may be geographically scattered. It was important to realize that the use of the phone prevented reading participants' nonverbal cues and level of understanding, thus I verbally checked with the participant regarding comfort during the process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, as indicated on the informed consent form.

The third stage of data collection was conducting the interview. To conduct this stage of the study, I followed the semistructured interview protocol; I retained the freedom to ask probing or follow-up questions that were not explicitly included on the interview protocol if participants gave a noteworthy response that required further assessment. After determining participants' preferred method of interviewing, scheduling the interviews, and gathering signed informed consent forms, the interview process began. Before the recording began, I asked participants to decide on a preferred pseudonym to use in labeling their data. As the topic of the study was neutral, in that it did not have strong emotional content, I was able to gather data with either method. The main consideration was to consciously focus and check with all interviewees to gather rich and thick data (Tracy, 2013). The time allotted for either form of interview was approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.

During the interviews, participants could suggest additional materials that had assisted in making their involvement in English Composition 1101 a successful

experience. For instance, some students may have used additional software, other audio-visual aids, resource guides or other items that contributed to their persistence in the class. Other students may have found additional materials challenging and possibly influenced their decision to drop the course. Any data they chose to discuss, I probed further during the interview and noted carefully their responses as part of the overall analysis. Once the interview was completed, I thanked the participant for his or her time and answered any questions or concerns about the research study. I also ensured the participants had my contact information if any other questions or concerns arose.

Following completion of interviews, the fourth stage in the data collection process was conducted. Interviews were transcribed verbatim so that data were directly transferred to a textual form and was applicable for use in coding. A transcriptionist was used to transcribe the interviews and was given a confidentiality agreement to sign before any work commenced. The audio records had no identifying information for any participant. The audio recordings were identified by participant pseudonym, which the participant self-selected.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative studies, the researcher functions as an instrument because all study information flows through the researcher (Tracy, 2013). The role of the researcher for the study included collecting all study-related data. As the researcher, I engaged in bracketing and epoché. These practices involved my awareness and suspension of personal opinions and biases to get a clear view of the phenomenon under examination (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing and epoché allows researchers to approach the experience of each participant with an open mind (Mafenya, 2013).

As the researcher in this study, I had not held a professional role at the research site in either past or present years, nor did I hold a professional role at the site during the research. I did not have past or current relationships with the participants in this community college. I felt that I could interview students and collect data without being influenced by other opinions. In addition, my research questions were designed to draw from the participant's personal experiences and not my experiences. I believed this minimized personal bias since I transposed interviews verbatim.

I had experience as a traditional adjunct instructor conducting face-to-face courses at other colleges. My experience with online learning was from my own personal participation as a doctoral student. I continued to be aware of possible personal biases that I may have had related to the topic of attrition/low retention as I interviewed and coded data.

### **Data Analysis**

All data, including interviews, observations, and demographics were qualitatively analyzed to find patterns, themes, and concepts and used to make interpretations (Creswell, 2012). Unlike quantitative data that employs a deductive methodology, qualitative research is inductive and free of preconceived ideas (Tracy, 2013). The ideas behind the inductive methodology include condensation of thick and rich raw data, identifying how the data clearly links to the research questions, findings that are easily understood and explained, a discussion regarding similarities and differences in perceptions of course completers and non-completers, and often a figurative or graphical representation of the ideas that arises from the data (Creswell, 2012).

Thematic analysis was the method used to analyze qualitative data. It enabled me as a researcher to analyze and interpret themes that lie within the gathered data (Braun, Clarke, & Tracy, 2014). Thematic analysis consists of six steps (Braun & Clarke, 2012). It was important to note that, although these steps were described in a linear fashion, the nature of the analysis was recursive and entailed movement back and forth between the various stages, with some stages occasionally blurred together (Braun et al., 2014). For example, when looking to create categories, an initial placement of a code could change when it fit better into another category. Codes could be moved throughout the analysis. The objective was to create rich full themes that reflected the participant's experiences with the phenomenon. In addition, data were color-coded to help me track and compare the two groups in the final analysis.

In stage one, I read and reread the data several times. Repeated passes through the data enabled me to become familiar with the data. Reading the data enabled me to begin to see patterns, repeated words and ideas the participants expressed. Course completers' data were color-coded. As I read the transcripts, I used a different color to highlight like ideas. I wrote notes and observations in the margins of the interview transcripts to remind myself of any thoughts or ideas that emerged during this process. Stage two consisted of coding the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). I continued to keep the two groups' data separated. The data were disaggregated into units of meaning. Each unit was assigned a code. A code was given a short and clear label that captured the key idea expressed in the data (Braun et al., 2014). The code could be descriptive or interpretive and conveyed the meaning in such a way that seeing the data was not necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2012).



Stage three consisted of gathering like codes into categories. Categories were created by finding codes with similar meanings and grouping those codes together with a descriptive label then analyzing the categories to see if they combined and formed a theme or if a category was so dense that no further reduction was required to form a theme. Three ideas for creating themes: (a) Does the theme answer a research question; (b) Does the theme cross several data units; and (c) Is there a central core idea by which the information is organized (Clarke & Braun, 2012)? Before moving on to the next stage, each theme should be mapped out and reviewed. A summarized, written description of each theme was created. The description included a definition, relationships between themes were explicated, and sample quotes identified.

In stage four, the themes were reviewed to ensure quality and depth. The summary created in stage 4 was reviewed and assessed. The summary contained a complete description of the theme with definitions, relationships, and supporting quotes. The description was detailed and contained information from at least three sources. Reviewing the data ensured that important information was not overlooked, and coding errors did not happen. I looked for codes that were appropriate. Relevant codes were included, and themes were explored to ensure the theme matched the description explained in the summary.

Stage five consisted of defining and naming the themes. Each theme was given a name that captured the essence of the theme. The following four themes emerged from the words used by the participants: (a) learning methodologies, (b) learning outcomes, (c) faculty engagement, and (d) student maturity. Themes of completers and non-completers were apparent at this stage. The four themes were created to help in the organization and

analysis of the data, as well as for ease of reporting and exploring the results. Making sense of the raw data remained at the heart of qualitative research, and creation of themes was the final step in explaining the results. The final stage of the analysis consisted of comparing the data between the course completers and the non-completers, completion of writing, reporting, and editing the results of the analysis for presentation.

### **Evidence of Quality**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility describes the degree to which study results accurately reflect what participants intend to communicate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation is a strategy using multiple data sources to confirm credibility of the findings (Merriam, 2009). Denzin and Lincoln (2012) presented four types of triangulation: (a) use of multiple methods, (b) multiple sources of data, (c) multiple investigators, or (d) multiple theories. I addressed credibility within my interviews, striving to gather authentic, in-depth responses from participants. Through triangulation of the data using multiple sources, I compared the interview data to the demographic survey and my observation notes. By connecting interview themes to additional sources of data, I built a strong support for themes that emerged from my findings.

Member checking is another strategy to support the credibility of qualitative findings. The purpose of this strategy is to provide participants a preliminary analysis of the researcher's interpretation of the findings to determine if the interpretations are accurate or if the participant wants to clarify any part of the findings (Merriam, 2009). Hence, by using member checking, participants' perceptions are not misinterpreted. Raw

data are not sent back for corrections. To enhance my credibility, I provided transcriptions of the interview to participants as I began to code the data. In addition to ensure accuracy of transcriptions, I wanted to clarify specific information and interpretations. I was also checking with the participants to ensure I was accurately reporting what they were stating.

During interviews, I strove to gather authentic responses from participants. To prevent intrusion, I remained aware of all aspects of communication throughout the interview process, including non-verbal body language (Moustakas, 1994) to prevent any personal opinions or preconceived notions from affecting the interview.

Transferability refers to the generalizability of results across other individuals or settings (Burchett, Mayhew, Lavis, & Dobrow, 2012). In qualitative research, transferability was assured through thick description and sample variance. According to Pangaro and McGaghie (2015), richly detailing the data collection process improves transferability. Even if findings from a replication of the study are different, validity is not necessarily questioned. Rather, the difference in findings may just have reflected a variety of participant experiences that enriched the data.

Dependability refers to the likelihood that, given the same research context methodology, and sample, similar results would be achieved through replication of a study (Pangaro & McGaghie, 2015). To improve the dependability of the study, I documented all research steps in detail so that other researchers could replicate the study. A detailed audit trail was kept with my field log, with details about all stages of the study. Having an audit trail adds to the rigor of the study and enables other researchers to follow the trail by following all steps outlined in the logbook.

Finally, confirmability was evident with the establishment of credibility, transferability, and dependability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Study results were reflective of the participants' voices. Confirmability "occurs when credibility, transferability, and dependability have been established" (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 154). To ensure that the study met the requirements of confirmability, I included direct quotes and supporting excerpts when explaining all study findings.

Even for those who share the same experiences, perceptions will differ among participants. For discrepant cases, Lodico et al. (2010) recommended examining the data carefully for comments that might contradict the hypothesis. Although contradictory, such statements can provide explanation for the case. The goal of the researcher is to provide an unbiased and balanced view; therefore, several strategies including member checking and peer debriefing are appropriate. Member checks "in which the transcribed interviews or summary of researcher's conclusions are sent to the participant for review" is an appropriate strategy to ensure the researcher did not misinterpret statements (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 274). Peer debriefing is another strategy in which a different colleague examines the data and meets regularly with the researcher to discuss different ways to reexamine the data and "and consider other ways of looking at the data." (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 274).

### **Limitations**

Limitations are defined as possible weaknesses in the study that were beyond the researcher's control (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In this study, I explored the perceptions of one group of students involved in online English Composition course. Case study data were used to garner a deeper understanding of a specific case, and the information

gathered was often not transferable to other settings. The availability of individual participants-imposed time constraints that affected the location or duration of interviews and the final number of participants. Additionally, the nature of the study may have possibly provoked biased responses if participants believed that their anonymity was not assured. Finally, the research site had an open-door admittance policy, which meant that education was accessible to anyone who aspired to attain knowledge. Researchers had shown disparities in high school achievement among minorities suggesting students from under-represented backgrounds were not prepared for the academic challenges of postsecondary education making persistence and eventual degree completion problematic (Witkow et al., 2015). The lack of preparation could have been a factor within the population that I studied.

### **Data Analysis Results**

Through the research question, I explored community college completers' and noncompleters' perceptions of their persistence to complete requirements of an online English Composition course. By exploring online persistence in the form of a research problem, I was able to build findings supported by student data and literature that aligned with the research question. Despite expanding growth rates for online learners, data from the local community college indicated that approximately 13% of the online students did not successfully complete English Composition (2014–2015). As reported in the literature, national retention rates for online courses were lower than the traditional face-to-face courses (Croxtton, 2014; Hart, 2014; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Soares, 2013). Findings related to the research question presented four major themes students believed were indicative of successful online persistence in an English Composition course. The

themes that evolved from exploring the problem and answering the research question were factors of student maturity, learning methodologies, learning outcomes, and faculty engagement.

In the study, I explored individuals' perceptions of their experiences within a specific instructional context and utilized the student experience as a unit of measurement. I used a case study design to explore participants' perceptions of persisting or not persisting in a specific online course to obtain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Participants included seven females and one male; of whom, six students successfully completed an online English Composition course, one student failed the course, and one student dropped the course (Table 1). Thematic analysis included examining the interviews of those who successfully completed this course independently from those who did not complete the course. Through the process of analyzing the collected responses, I aimed to deconstruct and then reconstruct the experiences reported to derive deeper understanding.

Table 1

*Demographic Information for the Study Participants*

Number	Gender	Race	Age range	Course status
1	Female	White	25–34	Completed
2	Female	White	25–34	Completed
3	Female	Hispanic/Latino	25–34	Completed
4	Female	White	18–24	Failed
5	Female	White	25–34	Completed
6	Male	White	35–44	Dropped
7	Female	Asian/Pacific Islander	25–34	Completed
8	Female	Black/African American	55–64	Completed

The primary instrument used in this research study was a semistructured, open-ended interview protocol created specifically for the study. An open-ended protocol allowed me to document students' perceptions to identify the factors they believed influenced their persistence or non-persistence in the online English composition course. The semistructured interview format allowed me to explore deeper as students discussed their personal experiences, adding further dimension to the study. Using a semistructured interview also ensured that participants were all asked a series of identical open-ended questions, which kept the interviews focused on the phenomenon under study (Turner, 2010). I used three other instruments to gather data for this study. I created a short demographic questionnaire and a participant observation sheet to be completed for each research participant. I gathered baseline demographic data, including, age, gender, race, year in school, major, and employment status, using the demographic questionnaire form.

The observational data sheets were used during the interviews to record notes and observations that were indicative of the participant's perceptions on the topic. Notes were targeted to include nonverbal cues, gestures, vocal tones, specific noteworthy words and phrases, and any other relevant information. I also kept a field journal to create an audit trail by recording all steps, actions, thoughts, and analyses throughout the study (Lofland & Lofland, 1999). Prior to beginning my interviews, I completed a pilot interview.

To test the interview protocol, I interviewed three people who had successfully completed the English Composition course. Once each interview was completed, I asked the interviewees for comments and suggestions for improvement. Following each pilot interview, I reflected upon each interview's effectiveness to denote areas in which I could probe for deeper explanations, and places in which I could have encouraged greater in-

depth discussion. I noted these reflections in my field note log. No changes were made based on the pilot iteration.

After I received Walden University's IRB approval, the president of ACC also granted me permission to conduct my research study. I contacted the online English composition instructors via email with information about the study. This email contained a student invitation to participate and included the title of my study, a brief description about the study, the selection criteria for participants, and my contact information. Because I was not an instructor at the college and did not have student contact information, I asked the instructors to forward the invitation to participate to current students and students who had withdrawn or failed the course within the current school year (2016–2017). The first round of emails failed to yield an adequate number of participants based on the target sample size. Therefore, I sent a reminder email two weeks later.

Initially, I contacted the potential participants via email to review the study details and requirements and determine their preferred method of communication (i.e., email or telephone). All potential participants were reminded that they were free to leave the study at any time and for any reason with no repercussions. No incentives or compensation were offered for participation in the study. Once the preferred method of communication was determined, I contacted each student and reviewed the study procedures, informed consent form, and demographic survey. All students were agreeable to signing the consent form and completing a demographic survey. Three students preferred to be interviewed on the phone while the other five willingly took time to be interviewed in person. The three students who participated in phone interviews sent their consent form



and demographic survey to me via email prior to the interview. The in-person participants completed their consent form and demographic survey and provided them to me before we began the formal interview. Data collection ended when I received no new information from participants.

I used a transcriptionist to transcribe the audio-recorded interviews, and the transcriptionist was provided with a confidentiality agreement to sign before any work commenced. The transcriptionist transcribed the interviews verbatim, including pauses and silences. I noted any specific body language or facial expression on the observation form. However, when I recorded the phone interviews, I paid special attention to identify any vocal changes that may hint at the need for further probing questions and took the opportunity to probe for rich details. Any vocal changes were noted on the observation sheet. The audio records contained no identifying information for any participant. I identified the audio recordings by participant pseudonyms, which the participants self-selected. To ensure accuracy, credibility, and dependency of each interview, I used member checking (Creswell, 2012). I sent a copy of the interview and findings with my initial interpretations to participants via email making sure my interpretations were accurate and represented their feelings and not my personal point of view (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants confirmed my interpretations of their interview were correct via email.

According to Braun and Clarke (2012), the first step in thematic analysis was to become familiar with the data. First, the transcriptionist transferred each interview verbatim into a Word document, so I could read these transcriptions several times. The second step of thematic analysis was to begin coding the raw data from the interviews.

NVivo does not analyze qualitative data itself but allows a qualitative researcher to organize and categorize qualitative data, like text from interviews and questionnaires (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Within the NVivo software, each participant's interview became an NVivo source. These sources contained all text from the interview transcripts. Researchers can use NVivo to manage these data, and to store meaningful statements at nodes (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). When researchers identify passages that were meaningful in the context of the research question(s), they can highlight those passages, which the program then saves as codes (i.e., the names of the passages) at nodes (i.e., the locations at which the statements are stored). When researchers identify similar sentiments in different interviews, they may code those passages to the same node. Doing this creates an uncomplicated way to view all statements that were coded the same (i.e., shared similar sentiments), and helps researchers visualize relationships between different codes.

For this study, I uploaded each transcript into NVivo 11. The categories that I created in NVivo were based on the codes that I identified (Table 2 stage 2/step 2 raw data/label), which I then used to explore patterns in the data and create meaningful themes based on these patterns. During this step, I analyzed each interview transcript line-by-line to create initial codes based on words and sentences in the text. An example of the coding process is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Example of Initial Coding From Raw Data*

Raw data	Initial code
I thought it was more like grammar, mechanics, like things like that you learn in high school, but you don't really learn. I thought it would be more in-depth version of it and it wasn't, it was strictly one essay after the other.	Students also wanted clear expectations of what to expect, many thought the course would teach one thing and found out that it was not
In order to be successful in an online class, a student needs to be very organized and aware of deadlines as well as constantly checking the Canvas or form of online learning the school uses for updates.	Marking down the deadlines for assignments and personal deadlines for larger projects
Yes, the instructor was on top of her class and responded within the same day of emailing even on weekends, which was not expected or required of a professor.	Students wanted teachers to encourage them, to reach out to them and support them

After generating the initial codes (stage/step 2), I moved to the third step of thematic analysis, creating the initial themes. During this step, I analyzed the codes for patterns that emerged from the data and assessed the relationships among codes. I created initial themes by grouping codes with similar features together into categories to capture their similarities. This step continued by moving back and forth from interviews to codes to initial themes until no further reduction was possible. An example of this reduction process is outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

*Example of Reduction Process into Categories*

Codes	Categories
Classmates to peer review their work and be peer reviewed by others	Peer learning
Peer mentors and other support networks help students with assignments and even things they went through in life	Mentoring
Having real world assignments that kept them connected to what was happening in the world and getting them to think about it	Global competence
Students took online courses because they were able to integrate those courses into their lives, especially those working full-time	Course content Assimilation
Real world skills, like grammar and formatting integrated into the classroom to help them moving forward	Course mechanics
How teachers connecting with students in the online classroom motivates those students	Faculty engagement
Students also wanted clear expectations of what to expect; many thought the course would teach one thing and found out it was another	Faculty engagement
Students wanted more communication and engagement from their online teachers	Faculty engagement
Students wanted teachers to encourage them, to reach out to them and support them	Encouragement
Students also wanted clear expectations of what to expect; many thought the course would teach one thing and found out it was another	Encouragement
Discipline to keeping on track with assignments	Self-discipline
Keeping motivated to complete the assignments and work	Self-discipline
Marking down deadlines for assignments	Time management

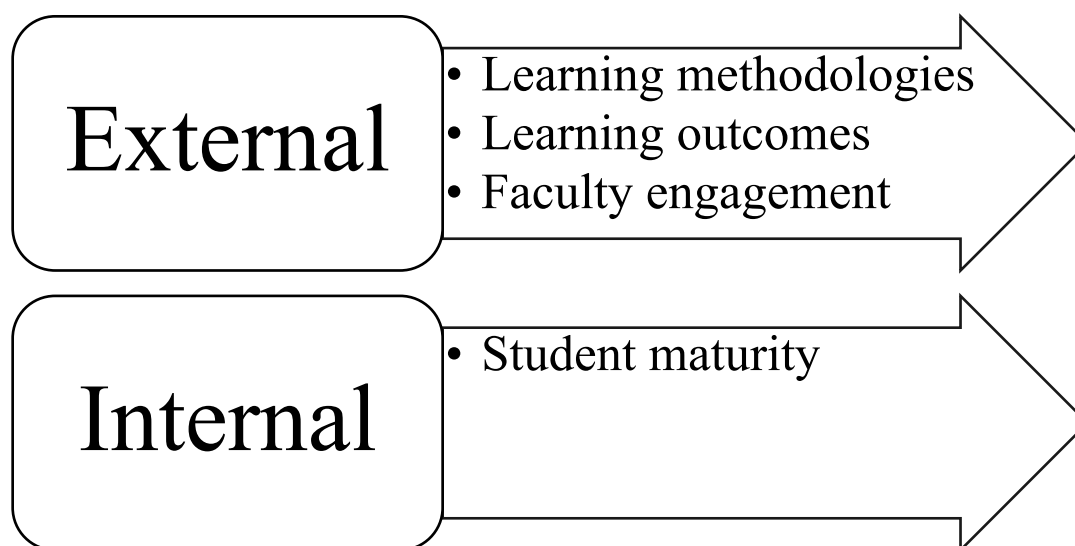
In step four, I reviewed the initial themes against the data to verify the accuracy of the thematic findings. After confirming the thematic findings, I defined and named the themes according to the content encompassed within the data. There were four themes that emerged from the data: (a) learning methodologies, (b) learning outcomes, (c) faculty engagement, and (d) student maturity. Four themes emerged from the categories and are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

*Categories Into Themes*

Categories	Themes
Peer learning Mentoring	Learning methodologies
Global competence Course content assimilation Course mechanics	Learning outcomes
Faculty engagement Encouragement	Faculty engagement
Self-discipline Time management	Student maturity

The four themes that emerged from the data logically connected to the theoretical framework designed by Kember (1989) explicitly for distance learners. The outcomes of this study systematically supported Kember's model that students entered higher learning with internal and external characteristics, which were related to persistence (Poll et al., 2014). These characteristics affected their decision to persist on a positive path that included social and academic integration or move on the path of outside qualities and academic disharmony, which adversely affected successful achievement and promoted eventual departure. Through the research question within this qualitative study, I explored the internal and external influences, both positive and negative, that community college students believed affected their personal decision to complete or not complete a required English composition course. The research for this study indicated more external themes influenced online students than the internal influences. Figure 4 outlined the connection of all four themes to the theoretical framework.



*Figure 4.* Connection of themes to theoretical framework.

### **Learning Methodologies**

Research participants spoke about the importance of external factors, such as various methods of learning that helped them successfully complete English Composition (EC) online. For some participants success was learning from other students in the class. Participants spoke about the contact that they did have with their classmates and peers, and that this was a system of support and help for them in class. For Participant 2, who described having contact with her classmates for peer review, these peer-review sessions for their essays were invaluable. Participant 2 elaborated how peer reviews for “an essay or short story” were helpful to identify areas of improvement and strengths because “your peers actually have to review and give responses on it.” In addition to learning about where they can improve, peer review provided an opportunity to collaborate and foster peer learning. The peer reviews provided the social connection with classmates, which created a system of mutual support, and the process also forced this participant to stay on

task and motivated so that she could share in this peer review process. The positive influence of peer learning made a substantial impact on these participants.

In addition to peer-review opportunities with classmates during the course, Participant 2 shared some valuable resources she found available through the school and online. Participant 2 said:

There were peer mentors for my school, so they are students who had succeeded in the course and have already passed and are doing so well they get approved that can help you one on one. Or you can go to library and get one on one assistants to help you [in a certain subject] for free.

Having “free tutoring and assistance” was a helpful resource to have available, especially with previous students who passed the course (Participant 2). In addition to the school-based resources that fostered mentored learning, Participant 4 mentioned there were “websites that you can go to that can give you advice” on different subjects. She shared the website worked as a type of “chat room” in which a student could reach out about “how to handle certain situations and what not” (Participant 4). Peer tutoring and assistance at no charge along with websites and chat rooms to assist students provided other students the additional support they needed to be successful in an online environment.

Some online students who enrolled in specific programs connected with others in the same major and were able to provide additional learning assistance and support for each other. For one participant, she shared how the program she majored in fostered a collaborative environment since individuals must take the same “twelve or fourteen courses” during the length of the program (Participant 4). Because “a lot of us have taken

classes with each other for [the] last two years, so a lot of us know each other by name now” (Participant 4). Participant 4 reported having a group of people she knew in her courses, especially online courses, “makes a difference” to her. Because several of her classmates were local, she had the opportunity to create and go to “study groups” with these classmates, often at the campus library. Online courses were not a difficulty for Participant 4 because she had a system of student support to collaborate to get together and discuss assignments, compared to Participant 6 who did not reach out to other students. Online courses do not have to be distant when you connect with others and share experiences and workload. The words of these students confirmed the importance of student support and peer learning to their educational experience.

Peer assistance can extend into personal support. One participant talked about peer support as an extension of her interactions with peer learning. While taking the class, Participant 8 experienced loss in her life, including two siblings within a matter of a couple of months. She said that, “the support [you] get from everyone around was [sic] great” (Participant 8). Peer assistance and other network support influenced students to persist in online courses.

In contrast, four students did not mention peer learning and mentored learning in their online course. Four students stated that they had little to no contact with their classmates throughout the class. Participant 6 explained how “online courses do not always require you to contact or work with other students” beyond forum responses. Participant 6 said his course did not require student contact. Therefore, he did not attempt to contact other classmates other than to post for discussions.



Participant 3 admitted that she would reach out to her peers “if I had any question about an assignment or to work on a project.” Outside of those circumstances, she did not reach out to any classmates. Participant 7 shared how “other students were anonymous during my English composition course.” When further questioned about those classmates, Participant 7 reported that “I was unaware of other students” in the course.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Connecting through real-world assignments was useful to help students stay current with world events and still work toward their learning outcomes. Participant 1 discussed how her instructor made real-world connections in the English composition course while students practiced specific learning outcomes such as grammar and syntax. Participant 1 explained:

[The instructor] incorporated some politics and news into the class which was different than I expected. Every week she would have assigned a discussion post on something going on in the world. We did one paragraph on what the issue or news was and a second paragraph on our thoughts about it.

Participant 1 needed to improve grammar skills in her writing. To achieve that learning outcome, this participant benefited from assignments that connected to the real world, informal writing assignments, and consistent grading standards.

Course expectations and student assumptions of the course content or the workload were not clear. Some participants did not believe they would be required to write numerous essays. Instead, they thought they would learn to improve their grammar, syntax, and writing skills by writing one-two paragraph assignments. Participant 5 shared her experience with the online English composition course:

I wasn't expecting as many essays I mean I feel like majority of our grades were essays I mean our midterm and final were writing an essay.... I thought it was more like grammar, mechanics like things like that you learn in high school but you do not really learn. I thought it would be more in-depth version of it. ... And it wasn't, it was strictly one essay after the other.

As one student noted, "I thought they were going to show me where to put a comma or a period or, you know, how to sentence structure" (Participant 2). She admitted to not having any idea of what the EC course would be like when she began. What she found was that the course pushed her because she was reading and writing responses to these readings on a weekly basis, which Participant 2 found enjoyable.

### **Faculty Engagement**

Participants in the study indicated that faculty engagement was important for success in the course, including their completion of English composition course requirements. One student believed that her success in online classes depended substantially on the efforts that the instructor put into the class. One participant summed up the importance of the instructors:

This class had a positive impact on my opinion of online classes and I have to say it is mostly because the professor was so informative and helpful. Online classes depend a lot on the professor because they have to put more effort into teaching their class without being able to exactly explain key concepts without being in person. (Participant 2)

The instructor shaped favorable perceptions of online classes. Despite the "positive influence" the course had on her feelings regarding online courses, participant 2

explained she had experienced online courses with instructors who did not shape favorable perceptions of the course. They did not engage students in the course. The instructors “took advantage of the fact that it’s an online class and they just used their same notes and discussions from the previous years and put no additional effort towards the students in class” (Participant 2).

Another component of faculty engagement was communication between students and faculty members. Participant 1 shared how “keeping in touch with me and my progress was very important to me” as a student taking an online course. For participants still adjusting to taking an online course, they appreciated the additional attention professors and instructors put into reaching out to students about their progress. Participant 5 believed she received more one-on-one attention in an online format compared to an in-person course because her professor was “more responsive than [they would have been] just in class.” Students who successfully completed course requirements rated faculty engagement and communication as a priority to helping complete online courses.

Students commented about faculty who responded to their questions in a timely manner. Participant 1 noted how responsive her online instructor was in responding to her questions or concerns. She shared “I can email my professor at 8 o’clock and by 8:30 I have a response” from her professor (Participant 1). Another participant mentioned how her professor was similar to Participant 1, stating “the instructor was on top of her class and responded within the same day of emailing [her]” (Participant 4). Anytime she “asked for clarity on assignments,” her instructor would provide further explanation and clarification to ensure she understood the assignment completely. Participant 2 even said

her professor would respond to her questions on “weekends, which was not expected or (sic) required of a professor.”

In contrast, one participant discussed how a lack of faculty engagement with the EC instructor negatively affected his completion of the course. Participant 6 wanted greater personal communication with his instructor communication stating, “I expected more contact with the teacher via email.” When asked if the instructor responded to his questions in a timely manner, Participant 6 said that he did not, and believed that the course was mostly self-taught, rather than an online course guided by an instructor. Participant 6 stated that the instructor “posted the syllabus to the course website, with no other guidance.” Questions about the syllabus were not answered and emails were not responded to” (Participant 6). His expectations to receive a high level of communication and support from the instructor were inaccurate. Because of the lack of support and communication with the instructor, he withdrew from the course before completing EC online.

During interviews, some students made recommendations to improve instructor engagement. One participant recommended that students would persist to complete assignments with more communication between faculty and student. Instructors should “reach out to their students” or “give them a call” if “you see someone is failing and “you keep seeing points being missed” (Participant 4). Even though distance learning did not require a physical presence, Participant 4 wanted “the professors to be a little more tuned in” to their students instead of in the background. Participant 8 agreed with Participant 4’s sentiment and elaborated if an online instructor “sees you lacking in a certain way”

they should “let you know in advance and see what they can do to help you get through it.”

Participant 5 agreed that communication between the instructor and students was a necessity, and instructors should be better about responding promptly to student emails. “If they don’t check it, you are out of luck,” said Participant 5, referring to the need for instructors to regularly check their email to assure any student with a question or problem has assistance needed to complete assignments can succeed in class. Students stressed how important faculty engagement and communication was to their online success.

Overall, each participant believed that an increase in instructor communication, engagement, and encouragement would translate to better experiences for online students. Participant 5 summarized this sentiment when she said that “communication is key” to succeeding in an online course. In the case of Participant 6, who did not feel supported by his teacher, a lack of faculty engagement was detrimental to his success in the online EC course.

### **Student Maturity**

Participants talked about issues of maturity, including self-discipline, time management, and flexible scheduling, as effective strategies that helped them succeed in EC online.

**Self-discipline.** This included keeping oneself motivated and on target with assignments. Participant 4 discussed how she kept motivated during her online class by reminding herself that “I will be done with my course at the end of spring.” Participant 4 explained:

Honestly it is just when you don't have a professor in front of you telling you, you're almost done. Getting ready... taking another online class. It's all about you, you have to remind yourself to do your homework and after a long day at work, you have to remind yourself. Hey I'm almost there. I'm almost to the end and you have to motivate yourself just keep self-motivation. It is making sure you make it to the finish line and cross over it.

Successful students recognized that being in an online environment required self-discipline to complete work and stay motivated, as well as strong time management skills to complete course assignments.

**Time management.** Strategies were important for keeping track of coursework. Some students liked that they could complete their coursework “after [work] hours” and on the weekends if necessary “because almost everyone has jobs” (Participant 8). Participant 2 liked that she could work at her own pace, which for her meant that online delivery was a more efficient use of her time. Another participant discussed the value organization and time management in succeeding in the classroom. Participant 3 shared:

In order to be successful in an online class, a student needs to be very organized and aware of deadlines as well as constantly checking the Canvas or form of online learning the school uses for updates. The student would also need to be able to do some self-teaching.

**Flexible scheduling.** Students liked the freedom to complete coursework ahead of schedule, or complete coursework around their other, more time-sensitive obligations. This was especially true for Participant 1, who shared how the online English composition course “works for my schedule a lot better [since] I can work at my own

pace,” which made it “more time efficient for my schedule.” Participant 4, who has a full-time job that involves a lot of overtime, preferred the online course because she was able to “just do my assignments and complete them on my time.” Participant 5 elaborated how the option to “work ahead if I wanted to” and flexibility to work on assignments “at 10 o’clock at night [when] I can’t sleep” were advantages of taking a course online.

Participant 6 elaborated that self-teaching was important since the instructor was not there to teach some of the material that they would otherwise in a face-to-face learning environment. Because learning in an online format is very self-driven, self-management, and organization were important to ensure deadlines were not missed.

### **Conclusion**

Through this qualitative study, I connected the findings to the problem of persistence by exploring the perceptions of community-college students enrolled in an online English Composition course. Through student perceptions, participants identified factors that had positive or negative influence on their persistence to complete the course. Findings from the data were connected to external and internal factors that influenced online students to persist or depart. Themes emerged from the data and each theme contributed to student perceptions of persistence in the online courses. Themes identified in the data analysis included external themes: (a) learning methodologies, (b) learning outcomes, (c) faculty engagement, and (d) internal theme: student maturity. The details in the thematic analysis were used in clarifying what external factors contributed to student persistence to course completion or departure. For instance, evidence of need for a system of support and communication among students-instructor through learning methods such as peer reviews, peer tutoring, and small-group activities was documented

in the learning methodologies theme. Student needs for clarity of course outcomes and greater guidance from the instructor regarding class assignments was evident in the learning outcomes theme. Within the faculty engagement theme, student perceptions identified the need for greater instructor presence, communication, and quality learning activities. The final internal theme was student maturity. Students listed factors such as self-discipline, motivation and time management as personal strategies that assisted them in persistence to course completion. Through the analysis, the themes were systematically linked to the research question, which provided rich details of student perceptions of their persistence to complete or not complete an online English composition course.

The themes logically connected to Kember's theoretical framework, a model of student progress, and supported the notion that students enter higher learning with internal and external characteristics, which related to persistence and affected their decision to persist or depart. In addition, the themes corresponded to the extensive literature (Hart, 2012).

The three external themes underscored the need for pedagogical change as evidenced through participant comments in learning methodologies, learning outcomes, and faculty engagement. Student maturity was an internal factor that affected student persistence to course completion. Participants believed time management and self-discipline were important maturity factors for successful online course requirements completion.

Active learning is a general term for pedagogies concentrating on student-centered learning experiences with meaningful action or reflection by the student (Riggs & Linder, 2016). The four themes that emerged from the findings connected to active



learning pedagogies. In my study, learning methodologies are linked to active learning activities such as peer reviews and tutoring that provides students a system of student support to collaborate on assignments. Additionally, the findings emphasized the role of the instructor in the classroom proved to be pivotal in the success of participants (Seaton & Schwier, 2014). Active learning strategists responded, “Instructors must shift from a teacher-centered paradigm to a learner-centered paradigm (Roehl, Reddy, & Shannon, 2013, p 1). Participants suggested additional opportunities to work with other students through additional peer tutoring and small group activities where students evaluate others work. This student to student interaction and instructor to student interaction through active learning assignments is another example of an active learning strategy.

Analysis of the themes supported Kember’s model of student progress (1985). The four themes that emerged from this study aligned with the notion that distance learners were influenced by internal and external factors (Horton, 2015; Hu & Hu, 2012; Sithole et al., 2016; Vayre & Vonthron, 2017). Participants identified maturity and teaching factors that affected student persistence to course completion. Participants believed time management and self-discipline were important maturity factors for successful online course requirements completion. All participants noted the critical external role of the instructor as the main influence for successful course completion of requirements. Those participants who described their instructors as being supportive, more active within the course, providing meaningful and engaging activities had more positive experiences and success stories in the course than the participants who did not.

This section outlined the research design, role of the researcher, the study sample, instruments, data collection, and data analysis. The section also included an examination

of trustworthiness and ethical considerations within this study. Section 3 will present a summary of this study in the form of a white paper. Included within this white paper will be discussion of findings, further implications of the research, and research-based suggestions for improving retention in an online environment.

### Section 3: The Project

Based on student findings from this study, I identified a three-pronged approach for conceptualizing active learning in an online English composition course to improve persistence (Riggs & Linder, 2016). The findings from this study will provide institutional stakeholders information pertaining to the range of online experiences as perceived by participants. In addition, I present the understandings pertaining to the negative and positive pedagogical practices that helped or hindered their success in an online English composition course.

Improved pedagogical practices to increase online course persistence were suggested through the study findings. Literature also confirms the notion that pedagogical practice is critical to student success (Riggs & Linder, 2016; Roehl, Reddy, & Shannon, 2013; Seaton & Schwier, 2014). The goals of the study were to inform institutional stakeholders—including administrators, faculty, and support staff—of student perceptions of factors that influence successful and unsuccessful persistence in an online English composition course. In addition, I present an alternative solution to stakeholders to encourage collaboration and improve student persistence in an online course. The alternative solution is to implement a modified three-pronged approach that includes research-based strategies specifically designed for online courses (Riggs & Linder, 2016). Therefore, it is imperative that the project and research findings be dispersed to all institutional stakeholders.

## **Project Description and Goals**

I explored perceptions of a small group of online students to determine factors that contributed to successful and unsuccessful course completion of a required English composition class. The research question guiding this study was the following:

RQ1: What are community college completers' and non-completers' perceptions of their persistence to complete requirements of an online English composition course?

The local problem this project addressed was the high rate of attrition (13%) in an online, required English composition course. The goals of the project were to increase awareness of both positive and negative persistence factors and encourage collaborative communication among institutional stakeholders. Participants identified factors that helped them persist to successful course completion and other factors that prevented course completion and could be modified through research-based strategies. Ultimately, participants' perceptions revealed information specific to their online environment and the factors they felt facilitated a successful or unsuccessful experience.

I conducted an examination of student perceptions of persistence in a required English composition class at a local community college. Findings from my research suggest a need for a change in pedagogical practices. I modified a three-pronged approach for an alternative solution to student online course completion (Riggs & Linder, 2016). I selected and modified activities to be adapted specific to the English composition course. I also incorporated strategies from other authors and studies. In the three-pronged approach for conceptualizing learning, the first prong is to create an "architecture of engagement in the online classroom" in which the instructor intentionally creates an

atmosphere of engagement by showing students how to navigate the course, appropriate interaction, and class expectations (Riggs & Linder, 2016, p. 1). In the second prong, web-based tools are used in addition to the learning management system. Standard learning management systems are instructor-centered and do not encourage student engagement and active learning (Riggs & Linder, 2016). However, web-based tools provide interactive space and offer students greater occasions for meaningful action and reflection on their learning experiences. By reimagining discussion boards as interactive spaces, they can become an active learning tool (Riggs & Linder, 2016). Discussion boards can be more than a textbook-based discussion. Discussion boards can be used as a presentation space, a gallery and reflection space, a workspace, and many more possibilities (Riggs & Linder, 2016). Within each prong, research-based strategies are suggested to help instructors set up courses that are students-centered (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

### **Rationale**

My white paper project deliverable was an outcome of the results of the research findings of this study. I selected a white paper to communicate study findings and promote change in pedagogical practices. The project employs a collaborative approach to meet the needs of online students effectively. Online instructors need support from administrators and support staff to make a successful change in pedagogical practices. The change would require the joint effort of institutional stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, and support staff.

Through a white paper, I am presenting an alternative solution to existing strategies and methods. The alternative solution addresses students' persistence problem

in an online English composition course. The project also encourages collaboration among all institutional stakeholders by presenting research-based pedagogies specifically designed for online learning (Riggs & Linder, 2016). White papers are used to report findings of a research study, present data, and outline recommendations (Graham & Gordon, 2001; Srikanth, 2002). According to Sakamuro and Stolley (2010), white papers are useful to researchers with a specific purpose and audience in mind. White papers present an alternative solution to existing strategies and methods in a concise format.

The white paper was chosen as the appropriate project to provide institutional stakeholders with information regarding students' perceptions of persistence in an online English composition course and provide recommendations for the modified three-pronged approach (Riggs & Linder, 2016). The data analysis for this study was grounded in interviews with students who successfully completed or departed an online English composition course. The literature review related to online persistence and factors that influenced students to complete a course or depart. Participants suggested improving institutional and instructional practices. I designed a white-paper project that would communicate findings and promote improvement in institutional and instructional practices to improve persistence in completing course requirements. The modified three-pronged approach offers research-based strategies specifically adapted for an English composition course that provides a foundation to improve instructional practices. The research-based strategies could be expanded, altered to meet individual and small-group needs, or serve as a foundation for creating new activities. Furthermore, the information regarding the three-pronged approach can be shared with all institutional stakeholders in a presentation.

The project content addresses the problem of persistence to retain students in an online course. The use of the three-pronged approach provided a guide in response to participant voices by addressing their data, as well as including the one internal and three external themes that interviewees believed affected their online success:(a) student maturity, (b) learning methodologies, (c) learning outcomes, and (d) faculty engagement. All four themes related to student persistence could be addressed through the three-pronged approach and research-based strategies that increase persistence by engaging online students in meaningful action and integrative and reflective thinking (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

Researchers have provided retention data, locally and nationally, demonstrating greater attrition rates for online students (Chiyaka, Sithole, Manyanga, McDarthy, & Bucklein, 2016; Hart, 2012; Park & Choi, 2009). Colleges have routinely reported that the number of students who drop out or unsuccessfully complete online courses as 20% higher than traditional face-to-face courses (Croxtton, 2014; Hachey et al., 2015; Hart, 2012; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Wilson, 2008). By disseminating a white paper and presenting this project to institutional stakeholders, I hope to increase awareness of persistence factors that influence positive and negative online course completion. I present an alternative solution to what is currently practiced. My solution includes a modified three-pronged approach that provides research-based strategies specifically designed for online learning that encourage collaboration (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

According to Sakamuro and Stolley (2010), white papers are useful to researchers with a specific purpose and audience in mind. In addition, white papers are used to report the findings of a research study, present data, and outline recommendations in a concise

format (Graham & Gordon, 2001; Srikanth, 2002). With these considerations in mind, I selected a white-paper format for this project to report the findings of this research study, present the data, and outline the recommendations to the institutional stakeholders at the research site, a community college campus in the southeastern United States.

### **Review of the Literature**

This review of the literature establishes a purpose for using a white paper to communicate to all institutional stakeholders the need for collaboration and to encourage a movement toward change in the pedagogical practices and institutional practice. By accessing multiple databases through Walden University's library, I attained saturation. Some of the terms I reviewed were *white paper*, *white papers on retention*, *white paper purpose*, *writing white papers*, *change management and challenge*, *implementing change*, *research-based instructional strategies for online learning*, *online student engagement*, and *social and academic integration*.

### **History of White Papers**

Historically, white papers were related to government reports and considered authoritative documents (Stelzner, 2007). Today, white papers can be an effective tool to advocate or defend an explicit point or solution to a problem (Sakamuro & Stolley, 2010). White papers can be used by stakeholders to assist in key decision-making and to justify specific resolutions (Stelzner, 2007). The message conveyed through a white paper targets a specific audience. Moreover, Stelzner (2007) described a white paper as a "document that introduces a challenge faced by its readers and makes a strong case why a particular approach to solving the problem is preferred" (p. 3). Sakamuro and Stolley (2010) also maintained that a white a paper supports an approach to solving a problem.



Srikanth (2002) suggested that white papers were more than a marketing tool. White papers could be used in other situations in which the objective is focused on results and decision-making or recommending a strategy. Today there are numerous white papers used in education to make changes.

The white paper in Appendix A provides an effective method to communicate student perceptions of online persistence that affected their course experience in positive and negative ways. In addition, the research-based learning strategies presented to the targeted audience offer an alternative solution to the problem of persistence and may encourage all institutional stakeholders to move toward collaborative planning for improved online retention.

There are different types of white papers. Graham and Gordon (2001) identified some of the most common types of white papers: (a) technology guide, (b) position paper, (c) business benefits, (d) competitive review, and (e) evaluation guide. The goal of the position paper is to convey a message in a convincing manner to influence the decisions of a specific group (Graham & Gordon, 2001). Kantor (2009) suggested the traditional white paper was too time consuming for intended audiences to examine complicated information. Kantor further recommended white papers be designed for readers who are busy multitasking and challenged for time. New formats for white papers were recommended with titles that capture a reader's attention (Stelzner, 2007) and highlight major considerations by limiting text and using more images or callouts (Kantor, 2009). To keep readers' attention, the length of a white paper should not exceed 12 pages (Kantor, 2009; Stelzner, 2007). Consequently, a white paper in the form of a position paper would present a solution or solutions and include the supporting data to

help increase understanding and effect change for administration, faculty, and support staff. Most importantly, in my white paper, the research-based strategies were specific to my study and not generic for all white papers.

### **Disseminating a White Paper**

Technology has made it easier to disseminate white papers (Kantor, 2009). Hard copies and digital forms can be made available for the intended audiences. Social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn, have been used for disseminating white papers. However, Kantor (2009) noted that dissemination of white papers on social media should only be done for the purpose of reaching the intended audience. In addition, prior to dissemination, white papers should be peer reviewed and all references included in the document. This step provides readers with further evidence of integrity.

### **How Theory and Research Support the Project**

Kember's (1995) model of student progress supported the project content. Kember (1995) identified five variables that influence student growth: (a) social integration, (b) academic integration, (c) external attribution, (d) academic incompatibility, and (e) GPA. The findings from this study reflected the relationships among social integration, academic integration, and GPA on outcomes as identified in Kember's (1995) model. For instance, four themes emerged from the data: (a) learning methodologies, (b) learning outcomes, (c) faculty engagement, and (d) student maturity. The four themes connect to Kember's (1995) model of student progress by demonstrating that distance learners enter higher learning with internal characteristics, such as student maturity, related to persistence (Poll et al., 2014). Students encounter two different learning paths.

The positive path accentuates social and academic integration and has a greater persistence rate. The second path accentuates outside qualities and academic disharmony that adversely affect successful persistence. Each path affects student GPAs and leads students to internal cost-benefit analyses that eventually direct the outcome of whether students depart or persist. Results from this study suggest that students who experience social integration with faculty and connection with other students were engaged in the coursework and completed the course with a passing grade. Two participants noted the lack of faculty and student engagement that led one to depart and the other student to repeat the course the following semester.

The four themes that emerged from this study were supported by the literature, which maintained that internal and external factors influence online students in their higher learning journey (Horton, 2015; Hu & Hui, 2012; Sithole et al., 2016; Vayre & Vonthron, 2017). Participant responses confirmed the internal notion that students believe time management and self-discipline are important for successful course completion. However, in their interviews, all participants noted the role of the instructor as the main influence for successful course completion. Those participants who described their instructors as being more active in the course, engaging, and supportive had more positive experiences than the participants who did not. Participants reinforced the notion from the literature that student engagement is positively linked with the quality of student learning, satisfaction, success, retention, and more broadly, personal development (Hu & Hui, 2012; Vayre et al., 2014).

Researchers encouraged course engagement through active learning methodologies since the early 1980s (Vygotsky, 1978). Bonwell and Eison (1991)

reported students need to be engaged actively in their learning. In other words, students should be completing tasks while thinking about their learning. For example, Bloom's higher-order cognitive skills including application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation can be strengthened using learning strategies, such as discussion, debates, role-playing, drama, peer learning/teaching, visual learning, and cooperative learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Khan, Egbue, Palkie, & Madden, 2017). These activities engage students while allowing them to direct their own learning. A study conducted by Sokoloff, Laws, and Thornton (2007) incorporated active learning materials into a college-level physics course using computer-based tools to facilitate student learning in an introductory physics laboratory. The Real Time Physics Laboratory curriculum was developed to make physics programs engaging and effective. Using microcomputer-based laboratory tools students experienced first-hand physics concepts. For example, "students could discover motion concepts by walking in front of an ultrasonic motion sensor while the software displayed position, velocity and /or acceleration in real time" (Sokoloff et al., 2007, p. 84). The microcomputer-based laboratory tools provided a method for students to learn physics concepts. Increases in learning and retention for students who participated in the Real Time Physics Laboratory as compared to students who participated in the traditional lecture, course work, and homework were mixed. Although learning gains varied at different research sites, understanding of the concepts increased approximately 40% to 60% (Khan et al., 2017; Sokoloff et al., 2007).

## **Project Description**

### **Needed Resources and Existing Supports**

Working toward a common goal of implementing new teaching tools to deliver the online courses could be a challenge. The president of ACC granted me permission to conduct my study. I scheduled my research and white paper project presentation during the fall campus staff meeting, which included administrators, faculty, and support staff. Following the presentation, I distributed the Stakeholders Survey (Appendix A) to be completed by all individuals in attendance. I provided an email address for stakeholders to obtain additional copies of the white paper project. This venue had the existing support structures and resources in place for scheduling a meeting, equipment, and supplies.

### **Potential Barriers**

Despite expanding information and experience in distance education, faculty may be doubtful regarding the quality of online education (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). The Inside Higher Education Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology (Jaschik & Lederman, 2014) indicated only 9% of faculty strongly agree that online courses can be as effective as face-to-face courses. As documented in survey results, respondents assumed that a face-to-face presentation engaged students more effectively and motivated greater learning than online formats (Riggs & Linder, 2016). Some faculty have been opposed to online teaching because they felt the demands of teaching in an asynchronous environment were greater compared to traditional courses (Murphy, Levant, Hall, & Glueckauf, 2007). Some instructors find adapting online activities that engage students to be challenging, especially in asynchronous courses when students were not interacting in real time with the instructor, or with each other.

## **Potential Solutions**

Change is often a challenge and staff may fear change in daily routines, as well as increased emotional stress (Lawler & Sillitoe, 2010; Patria, 2012). As such, the following strategies by Riggs and Linder (2016) were recommended for successful change management.

By suggesting the three-pronged approach with research-based strategies that support the approaches, institutional stakeholders including administrators, faculty, and support staff can structure asynchronous online courses so students will be engaged in their learning (Riggs & Linder, 2016). Online strategies differ from traditional instruction and student engagement can present challenges when offered in online learning environments. Therefore, it is imperative for other institutional stakeholders to understand the factors that influence faculty attitudes and participation in online education. All institutional stakeholders must be open to changes as they are proposed and implemented to improve online persistence (Odagiu, 2012).

### **Three-Pronged Approach**

The three-pronged approach presented online educators with instructional strategies that engage students and increase online student persistence (Riggs & Linder, 2016). The strategies can be modified and adapted to online asynchronous classrooms. Furthermore, the strategies align with the themes of this study, which were learning methodologies, learning outcomes, faculty engagement, and student maturity. Thus, the findings of this study support the recommendation of adapting the following three-pronged approach and research-based strategies (Riggs & Linder, 2016) for online asynchronous courses. The approach and strategies are modified to accommodate an

online English composition course. Furthermore, faculty are encouraged to review the approach and strategies and adapt them to their personal online course.

### **Atmosphere of Engagement**

Creating a community that encourages student engagement and motivation is an important component of the three-pronged approach. Based on the results of the study, exploration of the three-pronged approach, and an examination of the school's website, it seems as if community building is an appropriate recommendation to offer. Instructors can begin promoting successful learning experiences and a sense of belonging prior to the formal start of the course. An examination of the college's offerings to distance learners indicate the following services are available: (a) academic calendars, (b) bookstore, (c) career resources, (d) disability services, (e) web advisors, and (f) library access. None of the services offered include any type of community building activities. There are no online student publications, clubs, or gathering spots, such as a general online chat room for students to gather outside of classes. There seems to be little to no effort in creating a class identity or easy method to make connections with other students or faculty members outside of the classroom. Students cannot choose to sign up for a class with a friend as they have no control over class placement and minimal control in how or when they can access a professor unless they are currently taking a class with that individual. The school did not directly provide any information about this subject despite repeated requests.

Currently instructors post the syllabus and begin communicating with students the first week of class. By offering an invitation for students to submit questions/concerns prior to the start date allows students to clarify anxieties and have greater comfort in the online environment. Communicate with students; answer questions; and share course

schedule, policies, and expectations for online engagement by highlighting student expectations to respond to their peers and the instructor, as well as participate in online activities are proven strategies for success. By modeling respect for all participants concerning their conversations, discussions, and online contributions, the instructor sets the tone. Through their words, instructors send a message to students that their contributions to class are respected and valued. Hrastinske (2009) suggested these characteristics develop as students begin working collaboratively with other members of the class. A suggested recommendation is to welcome students by posting a picture and a brief biography. Have the students also post a picture and their biography. The act of posting a picture and biography can serve as an introduction opportunity and start students interacting and getting to know each other.

Instructors must clearly outline course expectations and objectives. Crawford and Persaud (2013) reported community colleges increased online student retention by 8% and estimated a 50% decline in student technical difficulties when students were provided with course information prior to the start date. Findings from my study indicated that students wanted a clear understanding of instructor expectations and course objectives. Current online syllabi post general course requirements, objectives, class links, and student expectations. However, course delivery differs with each instructor's style. Students reported that there seemed to be no single requirement to create a universal standard. Although the syllabi were consistent across courses, the implementation standards could widely vary. Based on an exploration of the college's website, students could not access classes early or locate copies of syllabi until they were officially enrolled in the class, and thus were unable to decide about the suitability of the course.



Many students agreed the differences in expectations from instructors increased their difficulty 10-fold. Therefore, a three-pronged approach to improving pedagogical practice recommends instructors begin the course with a statement of clear expectations of the students and themselves (Riggs & Linder, 2016). Poll et al. (2014) emphasized the need for a comprehensive syllabus for an online course available at least a week before class begins. Research-based strategies include adding to the written syllabus a recorded welcome page. Within the message, the instructor could guide the students through the published syllabus, highlighting vital information such as course requirements, expectations, assignments and rubrics that provide clear expectations (Khan et al., 2017). The instructor emphasizes contact information; describes where to find course materials and other information the instructor believes is important to student success. A message from the instructor adds a personal touch and engages students in the classroom community (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

### **Identify and Employ the Best Online Tools for Interaction**

Although current online syllabi serve as a guide to instructors, students believed that instructors did not provide a specific list of additional web-based tools that would be used in a course. Thus, general recommendations based on best practices were for syllabi design to list web-based tools that the instructor may be using. Riggs and Linder (2016) noted the choices that standard learning management systems provide are typically instructor-centered choices. The design menus allow instructors to post textual or video content, create quizzes or exams, and drop boxes to submit assignments. Current courses require students to post weekly to assignments, instructor's questions, and respond to

other posts. The degree of interaction within classroom is dependent upon the instructor's skill and ability to create an engaging online environment.

The three-pronged approach recommendations included discussion as an outstanding tool for generating a high level of interaction between students and instructors, as well as encouraging student engagement with course materials, instructors, and other students (Khan et al., 2017; Riggs & Linder, 2016). The three-pronged approach recommendations included tools that differ from the typical discussion forum of many online classrooms. For instance, web-based tools such as Google Sites (n.d.), Weebly (Square, 2019), or Wix (Wix.com, 2019) can be used to create student portfolios, encourage the use of visuals to compliment students' written work, and foster student reflection. Discussion is an effective activity to increase involvement and student ownership. Students can create video clips, debates, drama, role-playing or peer teaching and post into discussion boards. By incorporating various methods of engagement, faculty members facilitate discussion effectively. Khan et al. (2017) recommended audio, visual, and scripting incorporated into discussion boards.

Additional strategies for online discussions include video chat tools and discussion boards and forums. Blackboard and Moodle are examples of learning management systems that have a module for discussion among students and the instructor. Piazza is a free, online question and answer platform to manage discussions in the class (Riggs & Linder, 2016). The program integrates with current learning management systems, and includes features such as uploading pictures, videos, and files, tracking student participation, endorsing student answers and more to promote student engagement. Video chat tools such as google hangout allow instructors and students to

participate in discussions through video conferencing. Video chat solutions provide a variation to the more commonly used online discussion format that does not involve a video component (Khan et al., 2017). Grade separately individual discussions and activities, or the course can have a general participation grade (Poll et al., 2014).

Instructors are encouraged to share strategies and work with other instructors to expand and create additional active learning experiences to improve student engagement and encourage persistence (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

### **Reimagine Discussion Boards**

Students must have an appropriate level of comfort in participating in online activities. The existing course syllabus serves as a guide for instructors and each instructor has their style for presenting course content and creating a student-centered environment. Some of the students I interviewed did express a sense of a working environment between the instructor and the class. However, other students remarked that the course contained a considerable amount of posting and replying. Students who have taken online classes before may be indifferent to the post first and reply to two comments approach that has been the trend. By actively engaging all students through discussion forums, a sense of community develops within the classroom (Khan et al., 2017). For example, using the discussion board as a gallery and reflection space, students can post photos, create collages, or sketches that they feel relate to the topic being studied. Students explain how their example connects to the subject. In addition, students read and comment on three to four other classmates' reflections. This learning strategy engages students while reflecting on their learning experience and helps create a classroom community (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

**Promote the Exchange of Ideas and Information**

Currently, due to geographic location and part-time employment, many online instructors are isolated from their cohorts and conduct their classes independently. Based on student responses, email or contact in the classroom seemed to be the method used to exchange information. However, by using tools to help promote vigorous interaction among students, the three-pronged approach recommendations contain encouragement for online instructors to share and try active learning strategies (Riggs & Linder, 2016). Activities that are non-graded icebreakers or opinion questions, blogs, wikis, and Voice Thread can motivate students to engage with other students. By connecting with others using these web tools, students communicate and collaborate (Poll et al., 2014).

Careful thought and planning are required for student participation to be successful in an asynchronous course (Nandi, Hamilton, & Harland, 2012). Poll et al. (2014) recommended discussion topics and activities that have meaningful sequence, relate to course outcomes, and connect to other assignments. Instructors should use discussion topics that encourage students to express their opinions or add ideas to other student posts.

**Provide Timely and Relevant Feedback**

Existing guidelines request that instructors respond to student inquiries within 48 hours. However, some interviewees stated this was not always consistent and responses varied with assignments. Student interviews suggested that some instructors took longer to respond to questions creating student frustration. The three-pronged approach recommendations contain emphasis about the importance of communication between students and their instructors as critical to the success of an online environment (Poll et

al., 2014; Riggs & Linder, 2016). Much of the teaching in an online environment involves providing input and feedback in a timely manner (Kranzow, 2013). Feedback should be personalized including a balance of positive and helpful comments explaining facets for which the student needs improvement with steps to improve the work for future assignments (Poll et al., 2014). Instructors are recommended to insert in the syllabus how often they access the class and normal turnaround time for student questions. For example, an instructor might write in the syllabus “During the week, I check into class at least twice a day and answer questions within a 24-hour period or sooner. Saturdays I have other commitments and I am usually not online” (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

In an asynchronous discussion, instructor input is also vital. The challenge is to recognize when and how much input is effective (Poll et al., 2014). Strategies such as interjecting follow-up questions that require analysis and higher-level thinking and presenting opposing viewpoints, or information that requires further evaluation can be incorporated to keep instructor presence and help students make connections to units (Khan et al., 2017; Poll et al., 2014).

### **Implementation Timetable**

The white paper will be delivered to the president of the community college as soon as it is approved through Walden University. With the president’s permission, I will disseminate copies to all institutional stakeholders and meet with the director of faculty development to arrange a time that I can present the white paper to institutional stakeholders. This white paper contributes an alternate solution for low persistence and successful completion rates of students in online courses by presenting my

recommendation to implement a modified three-pronged approach (Riggs & Linder, 2016).

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

I created the project and I will deliver the white paper to the president of the community college and all institutional stakeholders. The responsibilities of the institutional stakeholders are to attend the presentation, ask questions for clarification, respond to the survey, and be willing to try one or two research-based strategies. The instructors' role will be to try one-to-two active learning activities and add activities as confidence develops with the new strategies. A critical aspect is for administrators to promote good communication and support change while working to improve retention through collaborative effort to expand instructional pedagogies (Lawler & Sillitoe, 2010).

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

The goals of this project were to inform institutional stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, and support staff about local online persistence rates and encourage collaboration of institutional stakeholders to improve online persistence. Therefore, I planned a goal-based evaluation to determine if my goals were met. I created an Institutional Stakeholders' Survey (Appendix A) to be administered to the administrators, faculty, and support staff who participated in the study and the presentation of my project. Through the white paper project, I presented positive and negative factors influencing student persistence in online courses and offered a solution through research-based strategies specific to online learning.

After presenting the project to institutional stakeholders, I will request the institutional stakeholders complete the survey (Appendix A) to determine if the project

goals were clearly understood and attain feedback from the audience regarding collaboration. The survey results will serve as my evaluation for the project.

### **Project Implications**

Entering college poses many challenges for students and can present an enormous financial commitment. Balancing family, employment, and class requirements is difficult for students with multiple responsibilities and can be challenging. Through the study, I explored perceptions of participants' persistence that related to successful and unsuccessful completion in an online course. A need for change by improving instructional and institutional practices to enhance online persistence and retention was indicated in the findings. The change can be accomplished by implementing a modified three-pronged approach that improves pedagogical practices through use of research-based strategies (Riggs & Linder, 2016). Once the white paper is presented, all institutional stakeholders including administrators, instructors, and support staff are included in adapting this new approach. Although the instructor is the stakeholder who influences the communicative environment of an online course, administrators and support staff are also involved in improving online persistence and retention (Seaton & Schwier, 2014).

Students would benefit from the modified approach by being engaged in a more meaningful and active learning community. Adoption of the research-based practices may also enable educators to increase effectiveness in their instructional strategies, engaging students, and improving student persistence. Social change could be seen in higher rates of course completion and a greater number of students completing certificates or degrees.

This study may lead to positive social change on a greater scale through a modified three-pronged approach for teaching online English composition courses (Riggs & Linder, 2016). In the white paper, I provide research-based strategies for student engagement and persistence in an English composition course. However, with creativity, the active learning activities can be modified and adapted to most educational situations. Thus, the white paper could become a source for other instructors to begin using the research-based strategies within their community college and expand to other campuses.

Section 4 contains the projects' strengths and limitations, suggestions for alternative research approaches to the problem. Section 4 also includes my personal reflections as a scholar.



## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

The strength of this project was that it explored the problem of persistence in an online course and provided findings from the students' perspectives. The qualitative case-study approach encouraged participants to use detailed descriptions regarding their perceptions of successful and unsuccessful persistence in an English composition course. From data gathered, I was able to present four major themes that addressed the problem and provide an action plan as a solution to the problem. This study can also serve as the basis for future research.

A limitation of my study was the use of a single data source: interviews with online students. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to a MS Word document, member checked, and peer reviewed for reliability and credibility. Using additional data sources, such as faculty, staff, or administrators, would have expanded the data collected and provided additional perspectives regarding persistence in online learning.

In my project, I presented qualitative data that yielded information regarding the personal online perceptions of eight students. However, the information gathered in the project may not be representative of all online students. Hence, the small sample size limited this study's generalizability to other locations. Although I combined peer review and member checking for additional credibility of the findings, using an individual data source limited my opportunity to gather additional perspectives. Further research that includes interviews of faculty, support staff, or administrators may create an extensive picture of online persistence at this specific community college

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

Perceptions of persistence influencing successful and unsuccessful course completion could be examined from a quantitative approach. The problem is online course attrition with dropout rates 20% more than face-to-face courses (Croxtton, 2014; Hart, 2014; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Soares, 2013). Researchers found barriers to persistence (Kuo et al., 2013; So & Brush, 2008) and student satisfaction as well as GPA (Boston et al., 2012; Hachey et al., 2013; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005; Rovai, 2003) as possible predictors that influence persistence in an online environment. By examining the problem through a quantitative lens, findings could involve a larger sample and provide more information specific to online course persistence specific to the research site.

An additional qualitative case study approach could be employed by expanding the interviews to include institutional stakeholders, such as faculty and administrators. Thus, the research would offer differing perspectives on factors that influence students in online courses. In addition, designing a mixed-method study would provide a stronger foundation for pedagogical changes. These alternative research approaches address the defined problem and findings may lead to additional projects, including professional training and conference presentations. Online student persistence and retention are complex issues that require continual research at all levels to keep updated on facts, current strategies, and learning tools available for online students.

### **Scholarship, Project Development, Evaluation, Leadership, and Change**

Kreber (2007) explained that scholarship in higher learning is not just an inquiry into how students learn; it encompasses more comprehensive agendas and anticipates questions involving the higher learning experience of students. Authors follow a line of

inquiry in their research problem, using reliable sources, support from previous findings, and conforming to APA style guidelines. In addition, scholars carefully structure their research to establish honesty and trustworthiness in their procedures, ensuring quality work.

Through my own personal experience, I discovered how demanding the research process can be, especially for the novice researcher. The process is time consuming; there can be numerous unplanned interruptions and the results do not always yield the expected answers. Additionally, for all the literature that supported the research findings, there were other studies that presented contradictory findings. For example, earlier in this study, I noted a study by Lee and Choi (2011) that emphasized the importance of faculty and classmate interaction for successful online student experiences. Yet, Swayze and Jakeman (2014) conducted a study that merged two cohorts of doctoral students and indicated that the merger of students into a larger group resulted in less interaction between the two groups. Hence, I learned that not all results will transfer to other research sites under study.

### **Project Development and Evaluation**

The development of the project required identification of the institutional stakeholders, as well as specifying a purpose, planning a method of disseminating the project, and evaluating the project goals. Institutional stakeholders included administrators, faculty, and support staff. Through the white paper, I encouraged collaboration between and among institutional stakeholders, and I suggested further research to expand pedagogical practices that may improve online retention. The process of offering a white paper to deliver research findings signified an effective choice

considering time and geographic constraints of institutional stakeholders, including administration, faculty, and support staff.

Following the dissemination of the white paper, I will meet with the director of faculty training to schedule a presentation of the project to institutional stakeholders. After the presentation, I will distribute a short survey (Appendix A) to institutional stakeholders. The survey will serve as an evaluation to help me determine if the project goals were met. This information will also help the community college consider avenues of support for continued improvement of pedagogical practices.

### **Leadership and Change**

Researchers reported the lack of student engagement to be a major factor for higher attrition rates in community colleges (Crawford & Persaud, 2013; Riggs & Linder, 2016). My study findings indicated a need for change by improving pedagogical practices to engage students and ultimately enhance online retention. The change required instructors to build a student community in courses through use of research-based strategies (Riggs & Linder, 2016). Institutional stakeholders, as part of the leadership, were included in this new approach since studies had shown online community college students have difficulty assessing technical assistance, library support, financial aid, advising and tutoring services (Crawford & Persaud, 2013). Leadership can help students select services specific to their needs and provide the additional support to help students become more comfortable and engaged within the learning community.

### **Reflection on Importance of the Work**

Throughout this project, I gained a greater understanding of the research topic and the amount of information available regarding persistence in an online course. I learned

to compare research findings, question others, and further explore ideas presented in studies. I have a greater understanding and respect for published, peer-reviewed research. In addition, my study is important to the research site. Through the data, I captured what students reported about persistence to complete an online class. Through their perceptions, participants identified facets needed to persist to class completion.

Although the sample size was small, findings from this research study may provide an online program with information regarding external and internal factors that influence student persistence. Recommendations for improved pedagogical instruction through institutional stakeholders' collaboration, and professional development could have a positive effect on student retention rate (Chiyaka et al., 2016).

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

Continued research in online persistence may provide institutional stakeholders with a better understanding of student persistence in an online environment. By improving persistence to complete a required course, students may progress to the next course with confidence and hopefully continue to attain their educational goal. As demonstrated in research findings, college-degreed adults earned more than persons with some or no college (NCES, 2015). Higher earnings provide economic security while also adding to the state and federal revenue.

The project also encourages team building by bringing institutional stakeholders together to work toward a common goal. The white paper serves to inform institutional stakeholders of the local problem and provide a foundation for developing research-based strategies that can help students improve persistence. Kemper's theoretical framework can serve as a guide for institutional stakeholders to follow as they strive to improve

institutional and instructional practices. Hence, the community college builds a reputation by demonstrating its commitment to serving students and helping them succeed.

Within my project, I delivered information to institutional stakeholders from personal experiences of eight participants. Although the sample was small, the findings supported the current literature that factors influencing completion or noncompletion of online courses are both internal and external. Continued research is recommended to ensure issues with persistence and online courses continue to be addressed. Further quantitative research is recommended. The project lends itself to survey research designed not only for students but all institutional stakeholders. Thus, programs can be customized for specific needs of this community college.

### **Conclusion**

In this qualitative case study, I explored student perceptions of their success or failure in an online English composition course at a community college. The sample consisted of eight students. The results of the study will help inform institutional stakeholders of the important factors, positive and negative, and provide research-based best practices for institutional stakeholder collaboration.

Through this white paper, I will present to institutional stakeholders a concise version of goals for collaboration, information regarding the retention problem, methodology including data analysis, themes, and recommended actions, along with research-based strategies to serve as a foundation for collaborative groups. Recommendations were made to explore persistence further in online courses by using quantitative data such as surveys; thus, adding a different type of data to gain a greater understanding of the local situation. Because student attrition in online courses is still a

problem (Dacanay, Vaughn, Orr, & Andre, 2015), institutional stakeholders must identify challenges this population face and focus on developing and implementing additional research-based programs and technologies to promote success.

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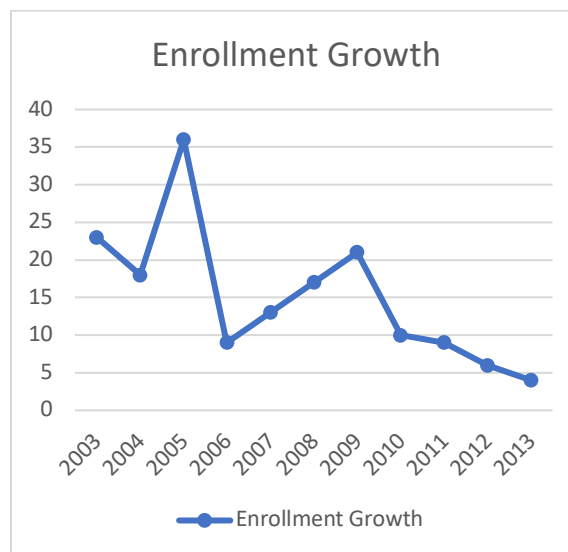
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## Appendix A: Do You Hear Their Voices?

### Introduction

The purpose of this white paper is to present current data regarding the results of a qualitative study I conducted at ACC community college to encourage a collaborative approach for all stakeholders to meet the unique needs of online students and improve retention. The stakeholders include administration, faculty, and support staff. I explored perceptions of a small group of online students to determine what are community college completers and non-completers perceptions of their persistence to complete requirements of an online English composition course? The results identified factors that helped students persist to successful course completion requirements as well as other factors that could be modified to improve retention through research-based strategies. Ultimately, participants' perceptions revealed information specific to their particular online environment and the factors they felt facilitated a successful or unsuccessful experience.



*Figure A1.* Enrollment Growth in First-Time Online Courses from 2003 to 2013

### Problem

Persistence in online courses had been a challenge for administrators and educators (Lee & Choi, 2011). Nationally, colleges had consistently reported the number of students who dropped out or unsuccessfully completed online classes as 20% higher than traditional face-to-face courses (Croxtton, 2014; Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2015; Hart, 2012; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Attrition rates affected the individual student and the institution through losses in tuition, resources, and governmental funding. Low retention rates could be associated with lack of quality in the educational programs, which reflects

negatively on institutions (Willging & Johnson, 2004). To exacerbate the problem, students may lose confidence and quit pursuing their course work entirely, never to return to school (Poellhuber, Chomienne, & Karsenti, 2008).

### Synopsis

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore students' perceptions of factors that influence their successful or unsuccessful persistence in an online English composition course at a community college and to understand how these factors influenced their persistence in coursework. The research problem identified and investigated persistence as "a student measure" (Hagedorn, 2005, p. 92). In other words, in this study the *persisters* were students who completed the English composition course with a "C" or higher. The *nonpersisters* were the students who departed prior to course completion or did not pass the course and did not earn course credit. Despite comprehensive quantitative research, effective strategies to reduce departure from online courses had not been successful. By uncovering themes, making interpretations, and forming conclusions about lived experiences, including perceptions and thoughts, I hoped to

contribute to the current research and distribute the findings as a white paper to assist faculty and administrators in recognizing their positive influences and providing research-based interventions that may improve persistence in an English composition course.

The results of this study may guide academic leaders and faculty to understand factors that enhance or hinder online learning. Researchers are starting to expand definitions of academic success to include personal goal attainment and increasing job skills gained through long-term and short-term education programs offered at two-year institutions (Witkow, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2015). This current definition is noteworthy as it focused on evaluating students' short-term success rates and measuring students' semester-to-semester persistence rates. This definition of success was also more suited for community colleges that focused on two-year and certificate programs.

Nakajima, Dembo, and Mossler (2012) described the social significance of degree attainment, especially for students at-risk of non-completion, such as low-income and first generation to matriculate in postsecondary education. Furthermore,

students reported an increased social interpersonal growth, which they attributed to having a degree (Gurin, Dey, Huntado, & Gurin, 2002). In addition, students reported a greater sense of belonging and perceived sense of social support that accompanied degree attainment (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Ferrins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). Hence, students who were successful persisters benefitted by expanding their educational qualifications, and postsecondary schools gained through tuition and grant revenue retention.

Students who dropped out of college may have incurred heavy loan debt and failed to achieve their goals (Kahlenberg, 2015). Moreover, employment opportunities were not plentiful for workers without an education and there were definite disparities in economic levels between educated and non-educated workers (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2013; Troste, 2010). Adults aged 25 to 34 who had a bachelor's degree and worked year-round, earned approximately 62% more than adults within that age range who only completed high school, and 29% more than an associate degree holder (NCES, 2015b). Moreover, this pattern of higher earnings associated with higher educational levels held for both

males and females and across racial and ethnic groups (NCES, 2015b). Avoidance of these problems may be significant for the individuals, as well as the communities in which they live.

### **Methodology**

In this qualitative case study, I explored individuals' perceptions of their experiences within a specific instructional context and utilized the student experience as a unit of measurement. A small group ( $n = 8$ ) of participants were interviewed to obtain a deeper understanding of their experience of persisting or not persisting in a specific online course. The group consisted of seven females and one male. These interviews provided a deeper understanding of the students' experiences of persistence in a specific online course. This group included six students who successfully completed an online English composition course, one student who failed the course, and one student who dropped the course.

Analysis of this group included examining the interviews of those who successfully completed this course independently of those who did not complete the course. Through the process of analyzing the collected responses, I aimed to deconstruct

and then reconstruct the experiences reported to derive deeper understanding. I found that while students agreed that time management and discipline were important for successful completion, the role of the instructor in the classroom was what really aided the successful persistence of participants. Those participants who described their instructors as more hands-on and communicative shared more positive perceptions of online experiences than those participants who did not.

### Data Analysis

The following four themes emerged from the data: learning methodologies, learning outcomes, faculty engagement, and student maturity. These four themes connected to Kember's model of student progress by demonstrating that distance learners enter higher learning with internal characteristics such as student maturity, which research

confirmed had a correlation to persistence. There were two different learning paths a student encountered, the positive path and negative path. The positive path accentuated social and academic integration and had a greater achievement rate. The other, the negative path, accentuated outside qualities and academic discordancy that adversely affected successful achievement. Each path affected student grade-point average, which led to students' internal cost-benefit analysis that ultimately governed the outcome of whether students departed or persisted. This qualitative study explored the positive and negative influences that community college students felt affected their personal decision to complete or not complete a required English Composition course. The research for this particular study indicated more external factors influenced online students than internal factors (See Figure A2).

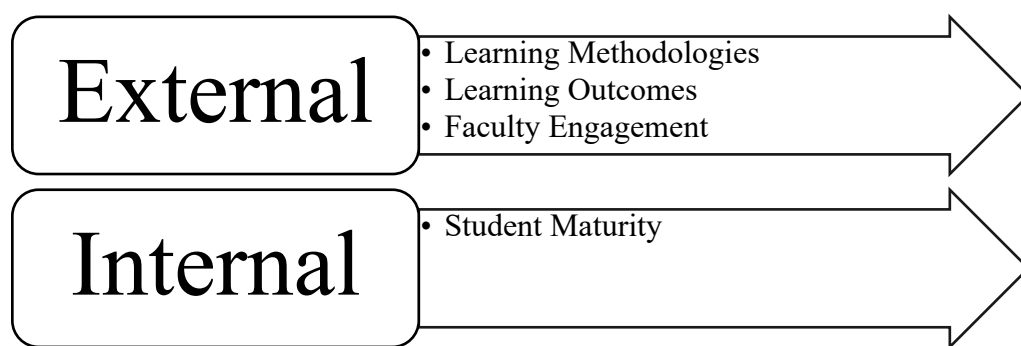


Figure A2. Connection of Themes to Theoretical Framework

## Results

Results from student interviews supported the theory that students are influenced by internal and external factors in their higher learning journey. Participant responses confirmed the internal notion that students believed time management and self-discipline were important for successful completion. However, in their interviews, all participants noted the external critical role of the instructor as the main influence for successful course completion. Those participants who described their instructors as being more active and engaging had more positive experiences and success stories in the classroom than the participants who did not.

## Learning Methodologies

Research participants all spoke about the importance of external factors such as learning methodologies that helped them successfully complete English composition online. For some participants this was learning from other students in the class. Participants spoke about the they had with their classmates and peers, and that this was a system of support and help for them in class. For Participant 2, who described only having contact with their classmates for peer review, these peer review sessions for their

essays were invaluable. Participant 2 elaborated how peer reviews for “an essay or short story” was helpful to identify areas of improvement and strengths because “your peers actually have to review and give responses on it.” In addition to learning about where they can improve, peer review sessions provided an opportunity to collaborate and foster peer learning. They also provided contact with classmates, which created a system of mutual support. In addition, they forced this participant to stay motivated and on task so that they could share in this peer review process. Participant 4 also mentioned meeting with students to discuss assignments and go to “study groups.” The positive influence of peer learning had a significant impact on these participants.

Participant 6 noted that because the course did not require contact, he did not seek out his peers outside of “the usual “comment 2-3 sentences in response” to a discussion post. Participant 8 admitted that she would reach out to her peers “if I had any questions” about an assignment or to work on a project. Outside of those circumstances, she typically would not reach out to any classmates. Participant 7 shared how “other students were anonymous during my



English composition course.” When asked about those classmates, Participant 7 reported that “I was unaware of other students” in the course. Although all students spoke about the presence of other students in their class, the importance of peer presence varied with each participant.

**Learning Outcomes.** Connecting through real world assignments was useful to help students stay current with world events and still practice their writing skills. Another participant liked the smaller, informal writings because they offered an enjoyable way to work on grammar through writing in a style different from a more traditional essay. One participant highlighted that no matter the style of writing, her instructor “graded each post based off quality, formatting, and grammar.” The instructor’s consistency in how she graded her assignments was clear and this helped this student to work on specific areas that needed improvement within her writing.

Course expectations were not clear for some students and many of the assumptions that students had related to their expectations of the course content or the workload. Two participants (Participant 2 & 5) did not anticipate the course being so writing

intensive. Instead, they believed, prior to beginning to the class, that EC online would be focused more on grammar and syntax. Thus, some participants stated it would benefit colleges to carefully outline course expectations and workload, so all students have some knowledge of course expectations.

**Faculty Engagement.** Faculty engagement was important to many of the participants. Several participants talked about the influence and favorable perceptions faculty engagement had on their success in online English composition. They believed that the success of the students in online classes depended heavily on the efforts that the instructors put into the class. This is because the instructor must successfully communicate key course concepts through a teaching platform that does not include face-to-face instruction. This was especially true for one Participant 1 who noted that a big component of faculty engagement was communication between students and faculty members. Participant 1 shared how “keeping in touch with me and my progress was very important to me” as a student taking an online course. This was especially true for participants still adjusting to taking an online course, who appreciated the

additional attention professors and instructors put into reaching out to students about their progress.

Students appreciated faculty who took the time to respond to their questions in a timely manner. Participant 5 noted how responsive her online instructors were in responding to her questions or concerns. Another participant mentioned how her professor “was on top of her class and responded within the same day of emailing [her].”

During interviews, some participants made suggestions to instructors. Participant 4 talked about how she wanted to see more efforts to communicate with students from online instructors. While Participant 4 understood instructors did not “know the students” as well as on campus students because “you don’t see the students two-three times a week,” she argued “they are still your students.” To her, this meant instructors should “reach out to your students” or “give them a call” if “you see someone is failing and “you keep seeing points being missed.” Even though distance learning did not require a physical presence, Participant 4 wanted “the professors to be a little more tuned in” to their students instead of in the background.

**Student Maturity.** Participants discussed how issues of maturity such as self-discipline and time management were effective strategies that helped them succeed in EC online. Self-discipline included keeping oneself motivated and on target with assignments; whereas, time management strategies were important to keeping track with coursework. Participant 4 talked about how she kept motivated during her online class by reminding herself that “I will be done with my class here at the end of spring.”

Participant 6 elaborated that self-teaching was important since the instructor is not there to teach some of the material that they would otherwise in a face-to-face learning modality. Because learning in an online format is very self-driven, self-management and organization were important to ensure deadlines were not missed. Successful students recognized that being in an online environment required self-discipline to complete work and stay motivated as well as strong time manage skills to complete course assignments.

### Summary of Findings

Through this qualitative case study, I explored the perceptions of students in an online environment who enrolled in an online English composition course. I employed a semistructured interview, observations, demographic data, and any data offered by the students to better understand the phenomenon under study. What I found was that while students agreed that time management and discipline were important for successful completion, the role of the instructor in the classroom was what really aided the success of participants. Those participants who described their instructors as being more hands-on and communicative had better experiences in the classroom than those participants who did not.

### Recommended Action

The results of this qualitative study suggested the need for adopting and implementing additional strategies designed to facilitate further student/instructor engagement (pedagogies) in a required online English composition course. Working toward a common goal of implementing new teaching tools to deliver the online course is a challenge especially for many faculties who may be resistant to change (Khan,

Egbue, Palkie, & Madden, 2017). Change is often a challenge and staff may fear change in daily routines as well as increased emotional stress (Lawler & Sillitoe, 2010; Patria, 2012). Therefore, it is critical for administrators to promote good communication and support change while working to improve retention through collaborative effort to expand instructional pedagogies (Lawler & Sillitoe, 2010). As such, the following six strategies are recommended for successful change management.

1. *Create an atmosphere of student engagement:* Building a community encourages student engagement and motivation (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2012; Shea, 2006). It is important for students to know their contributions to class count and are respected. Instructors can promote a sense of belonging prior to the formal start day of the course by posting a week earlier to answer questions, post a biography with pictures and encourage students to do the same. It is imperative that the instructor set the tone by modeling respect for all participants with regards to their discussions, online conversations, and dialogue with others.

The instructor leads and the class follows.

The instructor should clarify online course expectations and objectives. It is essential to have a statement of clear expectations of the students and instructor. For example, use a recorded welcome to the course, a welcome page describing where to find course materials and well-defined expectations for the class. This sets the tone. Use rubrics that provide clear expectations of the assignment and guide students in overall performance and provide standardization (Khan et al., 2014).

*2. Identify and employ the best online tools for interaction:* Instructors can encourage participation in small group activities through use of the course management site by assigning students to groups and providing clear instructions for the goals and tasks they are to complete collaboratively. Nandi, Hamilton, and Harland (2012) reiterate the importance of discussion forums through course management systems should be the groundwork for online courses. Discussion is an effective tool for creating and sustaining a high level

of interaction between students and instructors as well as promoting student engagement with course materials, instructors, and other students (Khan et al., 2014).

### *3. Reimage discussion boards:*

Discussion boards can be used for more than textbook based discussions.

Discussion boards can be used as a presentation space, a gallery and reflection space, workspace and many more possibilities. Suggestions for tools that to help promote vigorous interaction among students are non-graded ice breakers or personal opinion questions, blogs, forums, wikis, and Voice Thread (Bradshaw & Hinton, Poll, Widen, & Weller, 2014; 2004; Sher, 2009). Use discussion topics that motivate students to express their opinion or add ideas to other student posts. Hammick and Moon (2013) point out face-to-face discussions and activities are not necessarily engaging for the student who requires more time to consider their responses or quiet or shy student who does not participate. This allows the stronger verbal students to dominate activities. Whereas, in asynchronous courses, students are

expected to participate. However, students have the opportunity of taking time to think and reflect on their response prior to submitting their contributions (Hammick & Moon, 2013).

4. *Promote exchange of ideas* by providing suggestions for tools to help promote vigorous interaction among students, the three-pronged approach encourages online instructors to share and try active learning strategies (Riggs & Linder, 2016). Activities that are non-graded icebreakers or opinion questions, blogs, forums, wikis, and Voice Thread can motivate students (Poll, Widen, & Weller, 2014).

5. *Provide timely, relevant, and actionable feedback*: The data from this study indicated students reported much more favorable perceptions in courses where their instructor returned feedback in a timely manner. Communication between students and their instructor is critical to the success of an online environment. Much of the teaching in an online environment involves providing significant input and feedback in a timely manner (Kranzow,

2013). Feedback should be personalized and include a balance of positive and helpful comments explaining where the student needs improvement and steps including examples of how to improve the work especially for future assignments (Poll et al., 2014).

6. *Create a student-centered environment*: Discussion promotes student engagement and develops critical thinking skills as well as a sense of community. Successful discussion largely influences the effectiveness of online courses (Khan, Egbue, Palkie, & Madden, 2017; Maddix, 2012). Online discussion allows students time to reflect prior to posting vs. face-to-face discussion (Dixon, 2014). Additional strategies for online discussions include video chat tools and discussion boards and forums. Learning managements systems such as Blackboard and Moodle host online classes and can provide a place for students to communicate with each other and with the instructor. Piazzais an online platform to manage discussions in the class. Video chat tools such as google hangout allow instructors and students to participate in discussions through

video conferencing. Video chat solutions provide a variation to the more commonly used online discussion format that does not involve a video component (Khan et al., 2017, p. 112). Individual discussions and activities can be graded separately, or the course can have a general participation grade (Poll et al., 2014).

### **Challenges of Change**

Analysis of student interviews revealed both internal and external attributes contributed to successful completion or departure from the course. The internal attribute was student maturity. Successful students recognized that being in an online environment required self-discipline to complete work and stay motivated as well as strong time manage skills to complete course assignments. The external influences were learning methodologies, learning outcomes, and faculty engagement. All three factors, with regards to the study's participants, were found to influence students to continue to course completion or depart.

### **Project Summary**

Understanding factors that influence online persistence and departure can encourage stakeholders to improve student persistence. By completing a required course, students may progress to the next course with confidence and hopefully continue to attain their educational goal. Research findings demonstrate that college-degreed adults earned more than persons with some or no college (NCES, 2015). Higher earnings provide economic security while also adding to the state and federal revenue.

The project encourages team building by bringing stakeholders together to work toward a common goal. The white paper serves to inform all stakeholders of the local problem and provide a foundation for developing research-based strategies that can help students improve persistence. Project recommendations can serve as a guide for stakeholders to follow as they strive to improve institutional and instructional practices. Hence, the community college builds a reputation by demonstrating its commitment to serving students and helping them succeed.

## Stakeholders' Survey

Improving Retention:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Your participation is vital in determining if this white paper project met the goal of communicating to stakeholders' factors that contributed to successful or unsuccessful online course completion of a required English composition class and presenting instructional and institutional research-based strategies to improve retention.

On a scale of 1-5, please rate the following aspects of the course using 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree (Circle the number of your choice).

The retention problem was clearly presented with reliable evidence.  
1 2 3 4 5

Project and Action-Plan Evaluation: The goals of the project were clearly explained.  
1 2 3 4 5

The action-plan was clearly presented.  
1 2 3 4 5

What recommendations would you suggest to improve collaboration and campus support?

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## Appendix B: Semistructured Interview Protocol

The following questions were designed to align with a persistence scale for online education developed by Hart (2014).

1. Tell me about your school experience. Is this a first on-line class for you? Have you taken other types of classes? I.E. independent/correspondence classes, in-person classes, and so forth.

2. Tell me why you chose an online English Composition course? What did you think the online class would be like? How does your perception or what you thought an online class would be like compared with your experience of taking an online class?

3. Describe your participation in the class. Have you made friends with other online students? What skills or behaviors do you think a student should exhibit/demonstrate in order to be successful in an online class? How will or how did you determine if you were successful?

4. Describe the support that you believe has helped you with this class. Does your instructor respond to your questions in a timely manner? Are you looking for a specific kind of support? From administration? Teachers? Classmates or other students

5. Describe any events or experiences within the class that has affected your experience.

6. Describe any events or experiences outside the course that may have affected your online class experience.

7. Did you pass this course with a *C* or did you withdraw prior to completion?

8. How has your experience influenced your view of online classes? How likely will you be to take another online class? Why?

9. What specific goal are you working towards? Do you hope to hope to earn a degree?

Appendix C: Demographic Survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E

Gender: Male \_\_\_ Female \_\_\_

What is your age?

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- 65-74 years old
- 75 years or older

Ethnicity origin (or Race): Please specify your ethnicity.

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Other

Marital Status: What is your marital status?

- Single, never married
- Married or domestic partnership
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated

Do you have children currently living at home? Ages?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Employment Status: Are you currently...?

- Employed for wages
- Self-employed
- Out of work and looking for work
- Out of work but not currently looking for work
- A homemaker
- A student
- Military
- Retired
- Unable to work

What is your grade point average? \_\_\_\_\_

How many online classes have you successfully completed? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you complete English Composition 1101 earning course credit? Yes No

Do you plan to take an online course next semester? Yes No

## Appendix D: Observation Sheet

Time:

Date:

Place:

In Person/Phone:

Draw a physical map and describe the setting (on back):

Purpose of Interview: What were the factors in an online course that impacted your decision to persist to completion or withdrawn prior to completion of the course?

Reassure participant anonymity:

Establish rapport:

Nonverbal cues and gestures:

Vocal tones

Specific words or phrases that apply to social connectedness, perceived stress and support, self-motivation, goal attachment.