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They returned, but will they stay? Exploring the influence of college experiences on adult students' persistence

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THEY RETURNED, BUT WILL THEY STAY? EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF
COLLEGE EXPERIENCES ON ADULT STUDENTS' PERSISTENCE

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education
in the Graduate School of the
University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2011

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how college experiences, as perceived by adult students, influenced their decisions on persistence. Specifically, the role students' perceptions of their college experiences played in their decisions to persist in college or voluntarily depart without completing a degree was examined. A grounded theory approach was used involving 26 current, completed, and non-completed students between 40 and 65 years of age. Of these 26 students, 23 had returned to college to obtain masters or doctoral degrees, two had recently obtained their bachelors degree and were now seeking graduate certificates, and one was completing her bachelors degree after a 39 year absence from college. These students were interviewed regarding their college experiences within five main areas: Business Processes, Support Services, Student/Advisor Interactions, Classroom Environment, and Feelings of Fit.

Within these areas, four categories of phenomena regarding students' college experiences as most influential in their decisions regarding persistence were identified: Importance of Relationships, Assessment of Value, Feelings of Fit, and Challenges Encountered. Student's Expectations was the central category that brought the others together and served as the building block for construction of a theory, as an explanation regarding the phenomenon. The resulting theory, *Adult students' expectations of their college experiences influence their perceptions and assessment of the actual experiences, thereby influencing their decisions to persist in or depart college,* responds to this study's research questions.

Regarding the five main areas of college experiences, analysis showed that interaction with advisors and instructors was critically important to the students, and that

classes students considered intellectually challenging were also considered the most valuable. While analysis also showed that business processes and support services mattered to students, their significance was minor in comparison to the other areas. Students' overall feelings of fit were related across the spectrum of college experiences to the level of harmony or discord between their expectations and their perceptions of the experiences.

Based on the findings, it appears that college experiences, as perceived by adult students, can influence their decisions on persistence. It is recommended that colleges promote open discussion of students' expectations to reduce discord between expectations and perceptions of experiences.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study explores how college experiences, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions on persistence. The importance of this topic is evidenced by the fact that despite spending millions annually on recruitment and retention efforts, colleges still lose nearly 30% of graduate students each year, and similar to higher percentages of undergraduate students (ACT, 2008). Despite the fact retention has been a well-studied phenomenon, overall retention rates have not changed substantially for over 100 years (ACT, 2004).

The majority of studies on persistence have focused on the traditional students who often transition directly from high school to college, or on adult students attending undergraduate programs. This study steps outside those norms, looking instead at a very specific subset of the adult student population, students 40 to 65 years old who return to college after a significant gap in attendance. The participants in this study comprise three student status groups: *current students*, ones enrolled in classes at the time of interview; *completed students*, ones who had completed their degrees within the past two years; and *non-completed students*, ones who had made the voluntary decision to depart without completing the degree they were seeking. Additionally, this study focuses primarily on adults who are engaged in graduate studies, with 23 of the 26 students participating in this study being engaged in graduate studies. One of the current students was pursuing a bachelors degree and two who had recently completed their bachelors degrees were currently pursuing graduate certificates.

The purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge on this subset of the adult student population and to focus specifically on one aspect of persistence as illustrated by the primary research question: *How do college experiences, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions regarding persistence?* The study is intended to increase the knowledge base on college student persistence, and by focusing on this specific age range, and on how their perceptions of college experiences influence their decisions on persistence, this study stands to provide new perspectives on the issues. A list of key terms used is provided on pages 17 and 18 of this chapter.

Background

Our colleges spend millions each year on recruitment and retention of students at all levels (Noel-Levitz, 2006), yet we still lose approximately 50% of first-year freshmen at two-year institutions, more than 30% at four-year institutions, and nearly 30% of master's and doctoral students between their first and second year of study (ACT, 2008). In 1997, Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson referred to the phenomena of students leaving college without achieving their goals as the "departure puzzle" (p.107). Despite the dollars spent and the plethora of studies conducted, losses continue seemingly unabated.

Studies regarding persistence approach it from various angles using a multitude of terms. Those addressing keeping students in school often use the term *retention* (ACT, 2004, 2008, 2010; Bean, 2005; Berger & Lyon 2005), whereas studies looking at student loss refer to *attrition* (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Golde, 2005; Tinto, 1993) and others looking at both tend to use the term *persistence* (American Federation of Teachers, 2003; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008).

Leaving college is also referred to by several terms, with the most common being stop-out, drop-out, and attrition (Barefoot, 2004; Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 2008).

Lovitts (2001) identified colleges' focus regarding student attrition as potentially part of the problem, stating:

> Most graduate programs have responded to the problem of graduate student attrition by placing greater emphasis on selection, assuming that if they could only make better admissions decisions, attrition rates would decline. The emphasis on selection suggests that universities believe the problem lies not with graduate schools but with the students themselves. (p. 20)

If colleges follow this perspective then they are unlikely to look for, or recognize factors within the college environment that could influence students' decisions on persistence.

One cannot be a college student without interacting with the college community, with each and every experience potentially influencing students' thinking on persistence. The very steps required to become a student such as enrolling, registering for classes, and paying bills create experiences with the college's business processes. Other experiences include students' interaction with college support services such as tutoring, academic advising, and health care. Naturally all students attending courses on campus will have classroom experiences involving both its physical layout and instructor interactions. Even students taking graduate courses interact closely with program advisors. Add to all of this, students' overall feelings of fit within a college environment and it is clear that students perceptions regarding these college experiences can potentially play a role in factors related to attrition.

This study does not approach the research with the perspective that every person

who enrolls in college is well-suited for academic success, nor does any part of the study

mean to imply that leaving college without completing a degree equates to failure. It

does, however, proceed with the belief that most college students have personal goals and

that for some, how they perceive their college experiences can influence their decisions

on whether or not to persist until reaching those goals. It also proceeds with the

assumption that colleges need a better understanding of how students' perceptions of

these various experiences influence their decisions on persistence; an understanding that

can help instructors, advisors, and other college staff, ensure they are providing the best

support possible.

Most research on college attendance has focused on 17 to 22-year-old, full-time

students who transition directly from high school to college and reside on campus. These

stereotypical, traditional students represent fewer than 3 million of the 17 million

students enrolled in U.S. colleges (Stokes, n.d.). This narrow focus on younger students

is perplexing, especially when considering that between 2008 and 2019, the rise in

enrollment for students 35 years of age and over is predicted to be nearly double that of

students under 25 (Hussar & Bailey, 2009).

So who are the other 14 million plus students? Due to the common practice of

using only the terms *traditional* and *nontraditional* to describe students, they are often

classified as *nontraditional* students (Choy, 2002a), despite the fact that it is the norm for

graduate students to be 23 or older. Regardless of the term used, the practice of grouping

all students aged 23 and older as one classification presents the potential for additional

problems. This could lead to a 25-year old college senior nearing graduation and a 55-

year old freshman taking classes for the first time in over 30 years, being placed under

the same classification in many research studies. This lack of delineation among students

forces artificial groupings that provide little (if any) useful data because the groups are

potentially quite disparate.

A 2002, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education

Statistics(NCES) report, *Special Analysis 2002, Nontraditional Undergraduates* (Choy,

2002b) acknowledged there is no precise definition for nontraditional students, however,

their definition included anyone who satisfied at least one of the following:

- Delayed enrollment (does not enter college the same year of high school graduation);

- Attended part-time for at least part of the academic year;

- Worked full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;

- Was considered financially independent in determining eligibility for financial aid;

- Had dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);

- Was a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or

- Did not have a high school diploma.

By the NCES standards, an astounding 73% of all undergraduates in 1999–2000 were

considered nontraditional students (Choy, 2002b).

Many studies refer to nontraditional students but do not further delineate them, a

practice that potentially ignores a key aspect of the diversity among the student

populations (Landrum, McCadams, & Hood, 2000). While it may not be uncommon for

classrooms to include students in their 20's through their 50's or older, their reasons for

attending, the expectations they brought with them, and their approach to learning can be

quite different based upon their personal differences--differences likely influenced by

many factors including age and life-experiences. Students' age alone may well portend

different family responsibilities, levels of financial security, and overall approach to life

(McGivney, 2004).

Consider a 25 and a 55-year old student who are both first-year students deciding

whether or not to return for year two of college. This scenario presents the college with

two students in the same academic class who are 30 years apart in age, and potentially

worlds apart in life experiences. With both being classified as nontraditional students,

they are potentially looked at by the colleges' retention programs as essentially the same.

Colleges spend a lot of money and time to understand what factors influence

nontraditional students' decisions about whether or not to persist, but they may be doing

so without the requisite knowledge of the various student populations. Even if we ignore

the nontraditional title, we still have a potentially significant difference in the students'

approach to college (McGivney, 2004).

The 2009, U.S. Department of Education, NCES report, *Projections of Education

Statistics to 2019,* estimates the college enrollment of adults who are 35 years old and

over will increase by 22% between 2008 and 2019 (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). Between

1970 and 1993, the enrollment of students age 40 and older in higher education grew by

235%, from an estimated 477,000 to more than 1.6 million, the largest jump of any age

cohort, while students aged 18 to 24 dropped (Institute for Higher Education Policy,

1996). Add to these numbers the fact that the U.S. population is growing and getting

older with the population of Americans over age 65 projected to increase from 35 million

in 2000 to 72 million in 2030 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

That projection means the 40 to 65 age group is growing now, so their numbers as

college students will also likely increase, an expectation supported by the fact post

baccalaureate enrollment has increased every year since 1983, and the projection that

increases will continue through 2019. Graduate enrollment had been steady in the late

1970's and early 1980's, but rose about 67% between 1985 and 2007 (Snyder, Dillow, and

Hoffman, 2008).

 Some might argue that colleges should merely concern themselves with teaching

those who choose to stay and not worry about others who decide to leave. This argument

could gain ground when considering that between 1963 and 2006, enrollment increased

197% in four-year public colleges, 170% in four-year private schools, and 741% in

community colleges (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). While these numbers are impressive,

the argument misses the point. As Day and Newburger (2002) point out, the benefits that

accrue to society and the individual as a result of attending college are plenty and well

documented. They assert that over a lifetime, high school graduates earn an average of

$1.2 million, Associate's degree holders about $1.6 million, and Bachelor's degree

holders about $2.1 million.

 There is also an increasing emphasis placed on the costs to colleges of student

attrition; costs including loss of future tuition and fees, loss of faculty lines, and increased

recruitment costs (ACT, 2004). Student recruitment costs include hiring recruitment

staff, travel budgets, and marketing. Conversely, retention initiatives are estimated to be

3-5 times more cost-effective (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Tinto, 1975). As Braxton,

Hirschy, et al. (2004) and others have asserted, poor completion rates also negatively

affect the stability of enrollments, budgets, and the public perception of the quality of

colleges. Braxton (2006, 2008) also makes clear the need for instructors to help students

succeed, and sees the loss of students as a personal matter for instructors, not just an

overall college business issue.

As stated, some research addresses this topic from a focus on retention while

other studies focus on attrition, but regardless of the lens used, both address one common

issue, students' decisions on whether or not to persist in school. This study uses the

terms *persist* and *persistence* to refer to students continuing to enroll in classes. Research

on students' departure has commonly used the terms *student attrition* (Lovitts, 2001) and

*student departure (*Braxton, Hirschy, et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993).

Problem Statement

With up to 50% of undergraduate students and approximately 30% of graduate

and doctoral students leaving college without completing a degree (ACT, 2008), the

problem of attrition is self-evident. As Tinto (1993) stated almost twenty years ago,

"Few problems in higher education have received as much attention" (p. 35) and that is

still true today (Braxton, 2008; Stratton, O'Toole & Wetzel, 2008; ACT 2008, 2010).

Failing to complete a college degree can hurt both students and the colleges, as the

students lose the additional knowledge and opportunities that can accompany completing

a college degree, and colleges suffer in terms of stable enrollment, budget, and public

perception (Braxton, Hirschy, et al., 2004). Losing adult students to voluntary attrition

only exacerbates the problem, especially if their college experiences played a role in their

decisions to leave, yet few studies have explored this subject.

As is obvious, the challenge of student persistence is a popular topic, but clearly

not one easily resolved. In 1993, Tinto referred to a massive and continuing exodus from

higher education, and in spite of the subsequent research conducted, overall rates of

college completion have not changed substantially for over 100 years (ACT, 2004). The

challenges apply to all levels of college students but the task difficulty is increased for

adult students simply because studies on the retention and non-completion patterns of

these students is comparatively limited (McGivney, 2004), thereby limiting resources for

colleges to turn to for helpful guidance.

     The challenge is potentially increased due to the limited focus of some studies.

Despite evidence that experiences in the classroom environment matter, little has been

done to explore how they shape student persistence over time (Tinto, 1997, 1999, 2005).

As Lundquist, Spalding, and Landrum (2002-2003) point out, few studies have examined

retention and attrition as it relates to faculty, calling for more research to identify specific

attitudes and behaviors that occur in and outside of the classroom between faculty and

students. McGivney (2004), looking at the whole college experience called

dissatisfaction with a course or institution a common reason for adult non-completion.

She added that if dissatisfaction is in addition to external constraints and pressures, there

is a strong likelihood that students will abandon a program.

     These issues can apply to any group of students, but as Knowles (1973, 1980)

stressed in discussing andragogy, life experience can be a key difference between adult

and younger learners. Adult students, as a subset of the overall student population,

potentially have qualitatively different lifestyles, learning goals and aspirations than their

younger counterparts (McGivney, 2004). As Kasworm (2003b) stressed, colleges must

recognize adult students' needs and goals are somewhat different from their younger

colleagues' because they are in a different place in life and view the world and their

future differently.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to expand the field of knowledge on college student persistence, especially in regard to how college experiences influence 40 to 65 year old students' decisions to stay in school until earning a degree or to leave prior to that accomplishment. It looks specifically at this subset of the adult student population that returned to college primarily to seek masters, or doctoral degrees. In regard to students who then decided to depart without completing a degree, this study focuses exclusively on their *voluntary* decisions to leave, meaning they had a choice in their decisions, as opposed to involuntary dismissal.

This study differs from most current research on college student persistence in three key areas. First, it focuses on a very specific subset of the adult student population; students between 40 and 65 years old who returned to formal schooling to begin a graduate degree or complete an undergraduate degree. Second, for students who departed, it looks exclusively at *voluntary attrition,* meaning the students made the decision to leave college without achieving their personal goals despite having successfully completed at least two years of college. Third, and perhaps most uniquely, this study explores what role college experiences, as perceived by these students, played in their decisions on persistence. In this study college experiences are defined as the personal involvement in or observation of events as they occur as related to college.

A key aspect of this study is the distinction that it looks at factors believed to be within the influence of the college as opposed to external factors. Colleges can do little to keep students enrolled when events completely outside their influence occur. For instance, events such as job change or loss requiring students to move away from the

area, family crises, or other personal events that significantly interfere with attending classes are likely beyond a college's influence. While colleges may be able to help students through various support programs, they are limited in how much they can do that will influence students' decisions.

In expanding the knowledge about students' decisions on persistence, this study explores why some students persist and others do not, an especially curious question in cases where the two groups had what would appear to be essentially the same experiences. That question was in fact the genesis of this study and its exploration of the decision process rather than just the decision outcome for answers, a path calling for qualitative research methods. Simply asking students why they decided to persist or leave is insufficient. Cullen (1994) stressed there could be multiple simultaneous or combined reasons for students' decisions, but they often provide only the most recent one—the proverbial last straw. At other times the real reasons will not be uttered at all, as they may cite only reasons that do not threaten their self-esteem or that they perceive as socially acceptable (McGivney, 2004).

Adult students are referred to in research by various names including adult students, re-entry students, and returning students. This study focuses on a subset of adult students, specifically focusing on students who are between 40 to 65 years old, with at least two-years of successful college experience, and who returned to college after a significant gap in their college attendance. The age and experience qualifiers were selected to provide the opportunity to focus on adult students who had several years of adult life experience and by successfully completing at least two years of college work, had proven themselves able to complete the courses. The age range alone assures a gap

in college attendance but is important in that the research seeks to focus on students who made a conscious decision to return to college rather than ones who followed a more linear path of college attendance.

Some may suggest that the various bodies of existing research render such a study unnecessary, but many researchers including Braxton (2004), Lovitts (2001) McGivney (2004) and Tinto (2005), along with many others argue this sort of research is needed. Ultimately, my goal is to provide information that can help colleges better understand this subset's potentially unique perspectives. All but three of the 26 participants in this study are, or were enrolled in masters or doctoral programs. Lovitts (2001) describes these students then as being part of an "invisible problem" (p. 1) referring to graduate programs where the students leave quietly, silent about their reasons, and no one asking them why they left. This situation may be especially prevalent with this subset of adult students, who during their initial studies may not be enrolled in an official degree program. Without a focused look at these students, they can remain an unknown entity, making them even more invisible to the schools. Angie, a participant in this study, is a perfect example of the "invisible student" as she took 12 credit hours of classes before even registering in a graduate program. This practice is not uncommon, but sets the stage for schools to potentially lose students without anyone involved in student retention even knowing the students were there.

This study looks at college experiences as lived experiences by adult students in five primary areas:

- business processes, such as enrollment, registration, billing, and compliance issues;

- student support services, such as tutoring, academic advising, and health care;

- students interaction with advisors, especially as related to doctoral program students;

- classroom environment, such as instructor and peer influence, and physical setting; and

- students' feelings of fit, such as having a sense of belonging, comfort, and acceptance.

These areas were selected to represent the overall college experience from students'

initial contact with a college to the more subjective concept of their feelings of fit within

the college environment.

Each area is also prevalent in the literature as influencing students' college

experiences. Examples include Bean's (2005) comments on how business processes

influence students' attitudes; Miller, Bender, Schuh, and Associates' (2005) assertion

regarding students' rights to expect certain support services; Chun-Mei, Golde, &

McCormick (2007) discussion on the importance of student and advisor interactions,

Braxton's (2006) extensive writings on the influence of the classroom environment on

student' persistence; and Kennedy, Sheckley, and Kehrhan's (2000) discussion on the

vital role of students' feelings of fit. This exploration of adult students' experiences as

lived experiences in which they will apply their own interpretations implies an

interpretive or constructivist epistemology. As Merriam (2009) explains:

> Interpretive research, which is where qualitative research is most often located,
>
> assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single, observable
>
> reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event.
>
> Researchers do not find knowledge, they construct it. Constructivism is a term
>
> often used interchangeably with interpretivism. (pp. 8-9)

Merriam further explains, "The experience a person has includes the way in which the

experience is interpreted. There is no 'objective' experience that stands outside its

interpretation (pp. 8-9). This relates well to the issue of student' perception as will be addressed within this study.

As meaning is constructed by humans (in this case adult students), the meanings they ascribe to their experiences is filtered through their subjective lens. This suggests that the students will have already interpreted the experiences, thereby raising the potential that their interpreted reality is inadequate to accurately present the facts of the experiences. Fortunately, this potential inaccuracy does not adversely affect this study because in looking at the influence of experiences on behavior and decisions, misunderstandings of an experience can have consequences just as powerful as those an appropriate perception can have (W. Althof, personal communication, January 7, 2011).

Research Questions

This study explores how college experiences influence adult students' decisions on persistence to complete a college degree. Understanding that students' perceptions of their experiences may differ between students, this study focuses on how adult students' perceptions of their experiences influence their decisions on persistence rather than merely asking about the experience alone. To this end, the primary research question is written to make this focus clear: How do college experiences, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions regarding college persistence?

Five secondary questions are included to add specificity to the primary question by directing responses to one of the five main areas suggested as representing college experiences, business processes, support services, student and advisor interaction, the classroom environment, and feelings of fit. The secondary research questions are:

1. How do experiences with the college business processes, as perceived by adult

    students, influence their decisions regarding college persistence?

2. How do experiences with the college support services, as perceived by adult students,

    influence their decisions regarding college persistence?

3. How do experiences in interacting with faculty advisors, as perceived by adult

    students, influence their decisions regarding persistence?

4. How do the experiences in the classroom environment , as perceived by adult students,

    influence their decisions regarding college persistence?

5. How do feelings of fit, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions

    regarding college persistence?

   In addressing these questions, this study seeks to understand how college experiences influence adult students' decisions on persistence. It also seeks to identify what type of experiences have the most influence, and why they carry the weight they do in influencing students' behavior.

Significance of the Study

   This study is significant for three main reasons: First it studies a rapidly growing subset of the adult student population, students who return to college between the ages of 40 and 65 to begin or complete college degree or certificate; a population where in comparison to studies on traditional students the literature is notably limited. Second it looks at college persistence in a way few other studies have, focusing on the role college experiences, as perceived by these students, plays in their decisions on persistence. Third, in providing a theory to explain how college experiences influence persistence, it provides information colleges can use to better understand this important group.

If student retention rates were routinely in the ninety percentile, it is doubtful

many colleges would be spending their limited dollars studying persistence, but they are

not nearly so high. Colleges want and need to know why some students stay and others

leave, and this 40 to 65 year old subset of the student population is no exception. To

understand why these students warrant more research lies in a closer look at this subset

and the state of the current research. As defined, these are 40 to 65 year old students who

returned to school after a significant gap since their last attendance. They may have

talked about planning to or wanting to return for some time, but for a variety of reasons

waited until their 40's, 50's or 60's. It is likely these students have dealt with complex life

issues and made many significant decisions in their lives, so it is reasonable to expect that

deciding to go back to school was a decision made with considerable forethought.

The mere act of returning to formal schooling, especially when done after a

considerable break, would suggest a personal motivation and informed decision making,

so when some of these students then decide to leave again, without achieving the goals

that brought them back, that is significant and schools need to try to understand why.

Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn (2001), in a Lumina Foundation study assert that

educational systems need to extend studies on adult persistence so we can identify and

build structures within colleges to increase adults' chances for degree completion. This

research is intended to assist in that valuable goal.

Losing any student is a concern, but the consequences can be greater with these

students due in part to the impact their decision can have on others. Research shows that

socialization is an important aspect of college attendance (Pittman & Richmond, 2008),

so if others identify with an adult who returns to college, that might motivate them to take

classes as well. Unfortunately, if these students then change course and leave without

achieving their goals; that may be enough to deter undecided prospective students from

enrolling. Another reason these students matter is that just as younger employees can

benefit from exposure to older, more experienced coworkers, younger classmates may

also benefit from the older classmate. When the older students leave, their unique

perspectives and experiences go with them.

      Although this study focuses on a specific subset of adult students, some of the

information learned is likely to inform the overall body of research on student

persistence. Considering that this topic has been looked at for over 75 years and we still

have not figured out the departure puzzle, each step towards understanding students'

decisions on persistence is important. It is hoped that information gained through this

study will aid future researchers looking at student persistence, inform college retention

programs, and help college educators better reach their students.

Key Terms

- Attrition – The loss of students from college prior to completing the degree they were

  seeking (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Golde, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

- College, Institution, School, and University – These terms are often used

  interchangeably in the literature to describe providers of formal education. This study

  will only use the term college, except as necessary when using direct quotes.

- College Degree - As used in this study, this term refers to bachelors, masters or doctoral

  degrees or graduate certificates

- College Experiences – The personal involvement in or observation of events as they

  occur as related to college.

- Completed Student – Any student who completed an undergraduate or higher degree.

- Current Student – Any student who is currently enrolled when being interviewed.

- Non-Completed Student – Any student who after returning to school, chose to

voluntarily stop attending classes without completing a college degree.

- Persist – The act of continuing to enroll in classes on a regular and recurring basis

toward achieving a college degree (if students take more than two consecutive

semesters off of school, they are not considered as persisting). When this study

addresses "decisions on persistence," it refers to students' decisions on either option;

continuing to enroll in classes (persist) or decisions to leave.

- Retention – The reenrollment of students from one semester to the next until a college

degree (ACT, 2004, 2008, 2010; Bean, 2005; Berger & Lyon 2005).

- Student Departure, Stop-out, Drop-out, Withdrawal – All terms used to represent

the departure of students from college prior to completing a degree (Braxton, Hirschy,

et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993). In this study these terms are used interchangeably.

- Voluntary Attrition – The departure from college prior to achieving personal goals,

based upon the students' decision to leave. This is as opposed to departure based upon

academic failure, academic dishonesty, or other involuntary departure reasons.

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Summary

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Despite long-standing concerns related to student persistence and spending

millions each year on student recruitment and retention (Noel-Levitz, 2006), colleges still

lose approximately 50% of first-year freshmen at two-year institutions, more than 30% at

four-year institutions, and nearly 30% of master's and doctoral students between their

first and second year of study to attrition (ACT, 2008).

Most research on college persistence focuses on traditional college students, 17 to 23 year old, full-time, residential students who transition from high school to college. This research focuses instead on the 40 to 65 year old students, an important group especially when considering students over 40 are the fastest growing age group in post-secondary education accounting for 10% of all undergraduates and 22% of all graduate students (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1996). Without a better understanding of these adult students, colleges can do little to recruit or keep them (McGivney, 2004).

Some studies argue that the college's role in student attrition is less important than factors related to the students themselves, whereas other studies stress that colleges play a major role in attrition. This study does not ask which is most important, leaving that argument to others, instead, the focus here is on how the college experiences, as interpreted by the adult students, influence their decisions to stay or to voluntarily leave; looking exclusively at factors that are within the colleges' influence.

Chapter Two provides an overview of the literature regarding student retention and attrition in general; statistical data on college retention programs and practices; current knowledge on the influence of college experiences on student persistence; and of the limited research specific to adult students as defined in this study. Chapter Three outlines the qualitative methodology proposed for this study, and provides an example of category development, which Chapter Four describes the categories and answers the research questions. Chapter Five explains the discovery of the central category and development of a theory related to this study. Chapter Six provides a review of a student typology created to use in examining the data, and finally, Chapter Seven provides discussion of the study and its conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this chapter the literature is reviewed in three key areas: (a) college student persistence in general, (b) persistence among adult students, and (c) the influence of college experiences on student persistence. As McGivney (2004) makes clear, there are far fewer studies in the literature on mature students than for traditional ones. For studies focusing on adult students, the studies tend to look at two groups, adults returning to college to complete undergraduate degrees and doctoral students, especially those who do not complete their dissertations, or All But Dissertation (ABD) students as sometimes referred. As a result, this literature review provides more information on studies of younger students attending undergraduate programs.

That said, the information gleaned from this review still provided excellent data for use in preparing for this research, and for comparison between student groups. Additionally, as this study focuses more on the age of the students than the level of study in which enrolled, it is expected that the data will still assist this study greatly. Certainly adult students reentering college to complete an undergraduate degree started many years ago will face some challenges other adult students who have one degree under their belts so to speak, but there will also likely be many similar experiences as well, especially for the adult student that has been away from college for a number of years.

The review begins broadly then focuses on the areas critical to this study; how adult students' perceptions of their college experiences influence their decisions on persistence. The chapter closes with a summary of how this literature review informed this study.

The need for continued research is clear, especially as related to the adult students in the their 40's, 50's and 60's, the ones McGivney (2004) refers to as mature students. As McGivney points out, there is a paucity of detailed data on retention of mature students. The last two decades have seen an increase in research regarding adult students with excellent studies by Kasworm (2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2008), Imel (1995), Justice (1997) and Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm (2001), among others providing new insights into the perspectives of adult students. The fact remains that the majority of research on adult students focuses on adults in undergraduate programs, whereas this study looks primarily at adults pursuing graduate degrees. All of this reinforces the need for this study, especially as related to our limited knowledge on these adult students and the role of college experiences on their decisions regarding voluntary attrition.

College Student Persistence (and Departure)

"College student departure occupies the attention and concern of institutional practitioners, state policymakers, and scholars. For more than seventy years, departure has been the object of empirical research" (Braxton, Hirschy, et al., 2004).

As the quote makes clear, the study of student persistence is not new, however, one must not be misled by the longevity of the effort. Multiple studies lament the lack of specific research and call for additional studies, and despite the belief there has been considerable progress over the last 30 years in understanding what Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) call the "departure puzzle" (p.107), the overall rates of four-year completion have not changed substantially for over 100 years (ACT, 2004; Tinto, 1993). This point highlights the need for continuing efforts in all aspects of research on student persistence.

The earliest studies began in earnest in the 1920's and 30's, undertaken largely because colleges were concerned with institutional survival (Berger & Lyon, 2005). As colleges began to feel more secure, there was actually a trend towards exclusivity, with many colleges' ability to turn away a number of students being considered a hallmark of success (Rudolph, 1990). Even today the annual college rankings published in the *U.S. News and World Report* magazine still includes a category on "selectivity" where schools that accept a smaller percentage of applying students receive higher points in that section. With the continuing increase in applications to college, selectivity on admissions may be necessary for some schools to limit admission to only certain levels of entering students, however, nothing in the research showed selectivity equates to student persistence.

The concentrated push to understand and improve student persistence began in the early 1970's with studies such as Spady's (1970) college dropout model. Interestingly, Spady borrowed from Durkheim's suicide model (Durkheim, 1951) proposing a sociological model of the dropout process which included five variables being viewed as direct contributors to social integration: (a) academic potential, (b) normative congruence, (c) grade performance, (d) intellectual development, and (e) friendship support. Spady then linked the variables to the dropout decision through two intervening variables of satisfaction and institutional commitment. Spady saw a direct positive relationship between the level of students' social integration and their level of satisfaction with the college. The satisfaction led to more emotional commitment to the institution; a factor Spady saw as having a direct effect on whether a student decides to stay or leave.

Building upon Spady's studies, Tinto (1975) published the Interactionalist Model of Student Persistence which garnered near-paradigmatic status, as indicated by more

than 400 citations and 170 dissertations pertaining to his theory (Braxton et al., 1997).

Tinto's theory posited that various characteristics such as family background, individual

attributes, and precollege schooling experiences, influencing students' decisions on

persistence as well as their initial commitments to the college and the goal of college

graduation. Student entry characteristics included family background such as

socioeconomic status and parental educational level; individual attributes such as

academic ability, race, and gender; and precollege schooling experiences such as high-

school academic achievement.

   Focusing more on factors contributing to student attrition, Bean (1980) developed

the model of student departure. The model was an adaptation of an organizational

turnover model, which was developed to explain employee turnover in work

organizations. Bean's causal model posited that the background characteristics of

students must be taken into account in order to understand their interactions within the

college environment. The student interacts with the institution, perceiving objective

measures such as grade point average or belonging to campus organizations, as well as

subjective measures, such as the practical value of the education and the quality of the

institution. These variables are in turn expected to influence the degree to which the

student is satisfied with the school.

   Astin's (1984) developmental theory of student involvement was constructed as a

link between the variables emphasized in traditional pedagogical theories and the

learning outcomes desired by the student and the professor. In 1993, Astin conducted an

empirical study using longitudinal data collected by the Higher Education Research

Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles in its annual survey of

freshmen. Astin (1993) found that the three most important forms of student involvement were academic involvement (being engaged with the class material), involvement with faculty (actively interacting with the instructors), and involvement with student peer groups. From this, Astin (1993) determined the key to enhanced student retention was within existing institutional resources, coming from the ongoing commitment of an institution, its faculty and staff, to the education of its students. Astin (1993) found that the college-experience variable having the most significant impact on students' educational development was the frequency of student-student and student-faculty interaction.

Compared to earlier studies (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975), the Bean (1980) and Astin (1993) studies looked more directly at the colleges as having a significant role in students' decisions regarding persistence. That is not to say others did not consider the institutional role; rather that their studies tended to present it as a more passive activity, putting far greater emphasis on the student role in persistence than the colleges. In later work, Tinto (1993, 1997, 1999, 2005) addressed his changing perspective and the resultant emphasis on the important role colleges play in student persistence.

In 1979, Pascarella and Terenzini reported that voluntary persistence decisions of college freshmen were significantly related to the frequency and quality of student-faculty informal, non-classroom contact. The informal contact was found to be more important for students who initially had low commitment to the goal of college graduation. Pascarella (1985) then developed a general causal model in which he posited that student background, pre-college traits, and organizational characteristics of institutions directly impacted the college environment,

When applied to adults, research on Tinto's (1975) model has often led to contradictory conclusions. Ashar and Skenes (1993) found only partial support for Tinto's model when studying groups of adult working students in a degree completion program. They found social integration to have a positive effect on retention while academic integration was not found to be significant. Naretto (1995) also found a supportive college community to be a critical factor for adult persistence, however, Cleveland-Innes (1994) came to the opposite conclusion as her study indicated that academic integration factors were related to persistence for adult students but social integration factors were not. Interestingly she also found Tinto's (1975) model to be better suited to explaining adult retention than it was for traditionally aged students.

Continuing his research on the issues involved in student persistence, Tinto (1993) significantly revised his original theory in several areas. In *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition,* he delineated financial resources as part of the attributes or characteristics with which students enter college and acknowledged the role communities outside the college such as family, work and community can play in students' departure decisions (Tinto, 1993). Most critical to this study, Tinto also explained student departure as a longitudinal process that occurs because of the meanings individual students ascribe to their interactions with the formal and informal dimensions of a college (Tinto, 1986, 1993). This expanded work added "adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, isolation, finances, learning, and external obligations or commitments" (p. 112) to his original model. In this he proposed that the stronger the level of social and academic integration, the greater the subsequent commitment to the institution and to the goal of college graduation.

Tinto's revised model (1993) also incorporated Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage ideas, with separation, transition, and incorporation being the stages that mark an individual's path in the process of moving from "youthful participation to full adult membership in society" (p. 92). Tinto extended the stages to the process through which college students establish membership in the communities of a college or university in general, and to the case of early student departure from college in particular (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000, p. 252). Here, Tinto (1993) also recognized that different groups of students such as at-risk, adult, honors, and transfer students had distinctly different circumstances requiring group-specific retention policies and programs. His stipulation that different groups of students might require different actions to enhance persistence is rare among studies related to persistence.

Assessing Tinto's theory, Braxton et al. (1997) found empirical support for the propositions that asserted student entry characteristics affect the level of initial commitment to the institution, which then influenced subsequent commitment to the institution. Tinto (1993) argued the subsequent commitment was positively affected by the extent of a student's integration into the social communities of the college (social integration), and the greater this level of commitment, the greater the likelihood of persistence. Student entry characteristics included family background such as socioeconomic status and parental educational level; individual attributes such as academic ability, race, and gender; and precollege schooling experiences such as high-school academic achievement (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000).

Continuing research on student attrition and assessment of Tinto's work in the area, Braxton, Hirschy, et al. (2004), asserted that the validity of Tinto's (1993) theory

hinged on empirical backing of just two of its key propositions: "The greater the degree of academic integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the goal of graduation from college" and "The greater the degree of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the institution." Their assessment found modest empirical backing for the former proposition and strong empirical backing for the latter.

Tinto has continually updated his own work, and in a 2005 national conference on student recruitment, marketing and retention, he addressed some of his changes in perspective. Pointing out that when he first became interested in student retention, 37 years earlier, student attrition was viewed through the lens of psychology, and retention or attrition was seen as a reflection of individual attributes, skills, and motivation. He explained that students who did not stay were viewed as less able and less motivated. As he plainly stated, "students failed, not institutions" (Tinto, 2005, p. 1), a perspective now referred to as blaming the victim.

In 2005, Tinto commented that in the 1970's much of the work of retaining students fell on the shoulders of student affairs, with the faculty being largely absent, leading to retention activities being appended to, rather than integrated within, the mainstream of institutional academic life. As he stated, "Retention activities were then, as they are in some measure today, add-ons to existing university activity" (p. 3). Barefoot (2004) points out that when student retention is perceived to be the "business" of student services, course instructors are in essence relieved of any responsibility to relate retention to what happens in the classroom or in other teaching and learning settings.

ACT'S statistics (ACT, 2010) support other research on adult students such as Astin's (1993) empirical study using longitudinal data collected by the HERI that found the three most important forms of student involvement were academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups. Even the third program area, personal future building, can apply to many adult students, just potentially being less important to those who consider their personal future to already be well defined.

As stated, the majority of ACT's and others' research focuses most closely on traditional students, however, studies by Chun-Mei et al. (2007), Dorn and Papalewis (1997), and Golde (2005), among others have looked at doctoral student attrition. Within their numbers there is a population of students who have completed all college work except their dissertation. These ABD (All But Dissertation) students as they are commonly called, are often adult students and although they have completed all of their classes they are still very important to this study. These students have completed all classes so have naturally had many college experiences, and at least until completing their degree, potentially still have continuing interaction with the colleges. An intriguing question is why these students, after investing all of that time in college, still decide to leave without achieving their goals.

It is expected that some reasons adult students leave college without completing degrees will likely mirror those of traditional students. In November 2002, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released the report, "Short-term Enrollment in Postsecondary Education: Student Background and Institutional Differences in Reasons for Early Departure, 1996-98" (US Department of Education, 2002). This study listed the

following common reasons for leaving: (a) needed to work or other financial reasons, (b)

completed desired classes, (c) conflicts at home/personal reasons, (d) change in family

status, (e) taking time off, (f) not satisfied, (g) conflicts with job/military, and (h)

academic problems. Certainly adult graduate students will face some of these as well. In

fact, graduate students have reported they are always or usually bothered by role conflict

created by work and family demands (Anderson & Swazey, 1998).

Despite similarities in some challenges to persistence, it is expected that adult

graduate students' thinking on college attendance may be more developed, if for no other

reason than personal maturity gained through life experiences (McGivney, 2004).

Comings, Parrella, and Soricone's 1999 study on persistence among adult basic education

students in Pre-GED courses supports this assertion. They found that adult students over

age 30 and parents of teenage or grown children were more likely to persist in school

than others. These findings suggest that adult students may benefit from the maturity that

comes with age, and from less instances of having to care for young children.

In "Student Persistence in College: More Than Counting Caps and Gowns," a

2003 study by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT); a 125,000 strong

membership of college instructors, it is asserted that institutional factors are much less

important than student factors in determining persistence. However, others such as

Braxton et al. (2000) argue that the teaching practices of college and university faculty

play a significant role. Barefoot (2004) points out that the impact that various course

formats and styles of instruction may or may not have on student persistence has been

woefully ignored.

Despite the research on student attrition, rates have remained fairly consistent over the past 25 years (ACT, 2010). ACT provides this and other sorts of data through its research that collects information from colleges to help identify and better understand the impact of various practices on college student retention and persistence to degree-completion. Selected examples of those efforts include the following:

- *College Student Retention and Graduation Rates (1983-2006).* This is data on first-to-second-year retention and on degree completion rates, obtained through ACT's *Institutional Data Questionnaire* (IDQ) – an annual survey of 2,500-2,800 U.S. colleges.

- Six *National Surveys on Academic Advising Practices*. Since 1979, ACT, has collaborated with the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), in conducting national studies of campus practices in academic advising.

- *The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention* (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). This report highlights examples of successful retention practices, garnered from ACT's technical study on the influence of non-academic factors, alone and combined with academic factors, on student performance and retention. It is addressed more in the chapter, *Overall College Experiences Influence on Student Persistence.*

- Four national retention studies entitled: *What Works in Student Retention* (1980, 1987, 2004, 2010). These products provide valuable data on college student persistence, confirming the challenge of keeping students in college until a college degree continues, but again, we still have much to learn.

The first ACT study completed in 1980 is no longer available, but it was a joint project of ACT and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) sent to 2,459 two-year and four-year colleges, with nearly 1000 responding. It collected information about 17 student characteristics and 10 institutional characteristics that contributed to attrition and retention. In addition, respondents were asked to select from a list of 20 action programs that had been identified as having potential for improving retention. Conclusions cited three action program areas as critical to retention: (a) academic stimulation and assistance: challenge in and support for academic performance; (b) personal future building: the identification and clarification of student goals and directions; and (c) involvement experiences: student participation/interaction with a wide variety of programs and services on the campus (ACT, 2010).

In what was essentially a content replication of the earlier survey, ACT collaborated with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) to produce *What Works in Student Retention in State Colleges and Universities* (Cowart, 1987). In this report, 370 members of AASCU were included in the survey population, and responses from 190 (51.7%) were included in the analyses. When asked about strategies employed to improve retention since 1980, the following practice groupings were cited by more than 50% of colleges:

- Improvement/ redevelopment of the academic advising program (72.1%),

- Special orientation program (71.0%),

- Establishment of early warning systems (65.6%), and

- Curricular innovations in credit programs (61.7%).

In 2004, ACT conducted the study again, publishing *What Works in Student Retention.* The research team conducted an extensive review of literature and determined that since the 1980 study, a substantial number of new practices had been identified and undertaken in an effort to increase retention rates, rendering the former survey instrument outdated. A substantial effort was made to develop an instrument that would include items addressing both the historical and the newer practices, and that would address both the prevalence and the impact of their effect on student retention. In addition, the set of items assessing the institution's perceptions of the institutional and student factors affecting attrition was also reviewed and revised. Primary findings from the study included the following: (a) institutions were far more likely to attribute attrition to student characteristics than to institutional characteristics, (b) respondents from all colleges in the study reported retention practices responsible for the greatest contribution to retention fell into three main categories: First-year programs, Academic advising, and Learning support.

When asked to identify the three campus retention practices that had the greatest impact on student retention, all survey respondents identified at least one of the following: (a) freshman seminar/university 101 for credit, (b) tutoring program, (c) advising interventions with selected student populations, (d) mandated course placement testing program, (e) comprehensive learning assistance center/lab.

The 2010 ACT, *What Works in Student Retention* study continued seeking answers to questions about retention to help decrease the gap between college enrollment and degree completion. Questions included:

- Do retention practices vary based on institutional differences such as type, affiliation,

  and minority enrollment rate?

- What practices are implemented by institutions with the highest retention rates?

- Which practices do institutions deem to be the most effective in their retention efforts?

- What antecedents do institutions believe are attributable to the student and which to the

  institution in the case of student attrition?

    Each of these studies asked Chief Academic Affairs Officers (CAAO) and others

in similar positions to provide their thoughts concerning student attrition and retention.

According to ACT, the primary purpose of the surveys has been to assess the CAAOs'

perceptions of specific causes of attrition and of the factors that may affect retention. The

2009 instrument (used for the 2010 study) had seven sections:

- *Section I:* Background items - included designation of an individual responsible for

  retention.

- *Section II*: Retention and student degree-completion items - included specific

  percentages of first-year to second-year retention rates and student degree-completion

  rates, along with institutional goals and timeframes for increasing retention and student

  degree-completion rates.

- *Section III*: Comprised 42 student and institutional characteristics or factors that can

  affect student attrition. Respondents were asked to indicate degree of effect on student

  attrition.

- *Section IV:* Comprised 94 factors (e.g., programs, services, interventions, etc.) and two

  "other" options that if available were to be rated on the degree to which they

  contributed to retention.

- *Section V:* Respondents were asked to select the three items in Section IV having the

    greatest effect on student retention at their institution and to list those in rank order.

- *Section VI*: Permission to follow up and follow-up information (Not addressed in this

    study).

- *Section VII*: Comments

         The instrument was mailed to 3,360 Chief AAO's at 240 vocational-technical

schools, 949 public community colleges, 97 private two-year colleges, 598 public four-

year colleges, 1,318 private four-year colleges, and 158 schools whose type could not be

identified until the responses were received. ACT received sufficient responses from

community colleges, private four-year colleges, and public four-year colleges, however,

not enough from other schools for meaningful analyses (ACT, 2010).

         Section III of the ACT (2010) survey provided information on the colleges'

perspective of factors affecting student attrition. Interestingly, the highest mean score for

both the public 2- and 4-year colleges was, level of student preparation for college-level

work, a response that seems to suggest colleges felt academic ability was a major

influence on student success. All three college types had adequacy of personal financial

resources ranked as one of the top three factors affecting student attrition. If indeed

inadequacy of finances is a common reason for attrition, as opposed to a reason for not

attending in the first place, certain questions seem appropriate. For instance, did the

students fail to understand the costs upon enrolling; did the costs change significantly

after enrollment; or did something happen to alter the students' financial situation?

Failing each of these, it would seem plausible that the only thing that has changed is the

students' assessments of the return on investment.

All college types also ranked level of student motivation to succeed, and student study skills, among the five highest mean scores of factors affecting student attrition. There were three factors ranked very low among the colleges: campus safety, extracurricular programs, and cultural activities. Data suggests the colleges believe that a student's lack of preparation for college is a major player in attrition. However, Barefoot (2004) points out that in spite of the predictive nature of poor academic preparation, many institutions experience a more or less even rate of attrition across all levels of student academic performance. Barefoot further states, "The reasons the best students sometimes leave may be boredom, lack of academic challenge, failure to connect to the campus social systems, financial problems, general dissatisfaction, or desire to transfer elsewhere" (p. 2). Save for the financial problems, each item on this list of potential reasons could be considered a byproduct of "college experiences" as focused on in this study. This result certainly seems to suggest that many colleges place the majority of responsibility for attrition on the students; a practice that in part led to my personal interest in this study.

The ACT (2010) also provides valuable insight into the types of retention practices offered on the responding colleges' campuses, and on their ranking of those programs effectiveness. Both public and private four-year college groups listed "internships" at the top of the list, and all three types listed "tutoring" and "faculty use of technology in teaching" within the three highest incidences. The offering of "College sponsored social activities" was also high on all three lists, which is in line with Tinto (1975, 1993) and other scholars who have tied socialization to student persistence. Tinto proposed that the stronger the level of social integration the greater the subsequent

commitment to the institution and to the goal of college graduation (Tinto, 1993); Astin

(1984) found that the college-experience variable having the most significant impact on

students' educational development was the frequency of student-student and student-

faculty interaction; and Bean (1980) linked belonging to campus organizations as an

objective measure in students' perspective of the college.

When the 2010 ACT study responders were asked to rank the degree to which a

practice contributed to retention on their campuses. "Academic advising" received the

highest mean score for both types of 4-year colleges, and was in the top ten for the

community colleges. "Advising interventions with selected student populations" was

also in the top ten for all three. Opportunities to select some aspect of advising was

prevalent on the survey, as "increased number of academic advisors," and "academic

advising center" were other options that were listed high for all colleges. This focus on

advising, if manifested on campuses, indicates a positive development as studies have

shown that poor course choice or lack of specific goals as reasons for attrition (Kalsner,

1991; McGivney, 2004; Seidman, 1989). Over 30 years ago Noel (1976) pointed out that

retention begins with the admissions process, noting that admissions materials, personal

contacts with advisors, and expectations students have, all can play a role in students'

feelings of fit.

A concern this researcher has with the format of the 2010 ACT survey is that, as

shown with advising, some practices provide respondents with multiple opportunities to

select essentially the same topic. If respondents find advising particularly important and

there are three, four or five ways to select advising, they might select all of the options,

thereby bumping other non-advising practices from the top-ten. Similarly, as with all

surveys, the wording is a challenge in that it is open to perception. For instance, the

survey lists "Study skills course, program, or center" as an option, but also lists

"Comprehensive learning assistance center." While these two may have unique goals,

distinguishing between a learning assistance center and a study skills center could be a

challenge, leading to some ambiguity in selecting the top ten practices. This is especially

important when colleges use the data to help make decisions on how to spend limited

resources.

Statistics in the 2010 ACT study show that from 1983 through 2009, the retention

rates for college freshmen returning for their sophomore year have varied little. At two-

year public colleges the lowest to highest retention rates have varied only 2.4%, from a

low in 2004 of 51.3% to a 2009 high of 53.7%. Four-year public college results are

similar with a 2004 high of 70.0% and 1996 and 2005 lows of 66.4%. Currently the

retention rate for this group is 67.6%. Private colleges for the same time period run from

a 2008 low of 69.6% to a 1989 high of 74.0%, with a current rate of 69.9%. Masters and

PhD levels show similar ranges for both public and private colleges, and all of these are

currently running near their 1983 to 2009 lows.

The ACT findings provide telling information regarding college efforts on

persistence with some of the most informative statistics including the following:

- In spite of the attention paid to college student retention, only 51.7% of campuses have

  identified an individual responsible for coordinating retention strategies; only 47.2%

  have established an improvement goal for retention from first to second year; and only

  33.1% of campuses have established a goal for improved degree completion.

- Institutions are far more likely to attribute attrition to student characteristics than to institutional characteristics.

- Respondents from all colleges (two and four-year, public and private institutions), were presented with a list of 24 *institutional characteristics* to rank on their level of contribution to attrition. They selected only two of the 24 as making a moderate or higher contribution: amount of student financial aid available, and student-institution fit. In looking only at respondents from 4-year public colleges, they selected the same two but added three additional; student involvement in campus life, social environment, and academic advising, making it five of the 24. Interestingly, of 20 *student characteristics* presented for ranking, respondents identified 13 factors as making a moderate or higher contribution, with lack of motivation to succeed, inadequate financial resources, inadequate preparation for college, and poor study skills being ranked the highest.

- Retention practices responsible for the greatest contribution to retention in all survey colleges fall into three main categories:

  -- *First-year programs:* including freshman seminar/university 101 for credit, learning communities, and integration of academic advising with first-year programs.

  -- *Academic advising:* including advising interventions with selected populations, increased advising staff, integration of advising with first-year transition programs, academic advising centers, and centers that combines academic advising with career/life planning.

  -- *Learning support:* including a comprehensive learning assistance center/lab, reading center/lab, supplemental instruction, and required remedial/developmental coursework.

As a result of the combined research, ACT provides the following recommendations:

 - Designate a visible individual to coordinate a campus-wide planning team,

 - Conduct a systematic analysis of the characteristics of the students,

 - Focus on the nexus of student characteristics and institutional characteristics,

 - Carefully review the high impact strategies identified in the survey,

 - Do not make first-to-second-year retention the sole focus of planning team efforts,

 - Establish realistic short and long-term retention, progression, and completion goals,

 - Orchestrate the change process, and

 - Implement, measure, improve!

The AFT's 2003 report stated a central part of the AFT mission is to bring educational opportunity to students who were not usually in college 40 years ago, such as students from low-income families and working adults, women, minorities and immigrants. The report brings up an excellent concern regarding a tendency of regulatory agencies to find easy fixes to complicated problems. It provides as an example, the idea of using the federal Student Right to Know Act (SRK) information to reward or punish schools based upon graduation rates. According to the AFT, such a plan would assert that schools with lower graduation rates must not be doing a good enough job of educating their students, otherwise rates would be higher.

The AFT's (2003) report has several concerns regarding this approach, foremost being that counting caps and gowns as a measure of success in persistence is misleading. Their analysis has two basic principles: (a) the belief that institutions of higher education, particularly public institutions, must be, and in fact are, accountable for providing students with a quality education; and (b) the belief that student success should

not be just a concern of college faculty and administrators, but of states and the federal

government as well. The AFT study listed seven concerns (pp 5-6):

- Judging college persistence in terms of a school's SRK graduation rates is a mistake as

  it fails to account for part-time students, transfer students, and students who get what

  they want from college without graduating.

- Focusing on the college graduation rate also confuses two separate issues – the issue of

  dropping out and the issue of simply taking a long time to get a degree. The AFT points

  out that students who leave for various reasons but eventually return are counted as

  failures when they "are actually profiles in dedication and persistence."

- Drawing an analogy between appropriate policies toward PK-12 and higher education is

  a mistake as the PK-12 works with a specific set of standards that every child is

  expected to meet, whereas, college students pick the education they want.

- Rewarding or punishing colleges based on graduation rates "creates a perverse incentive

  for them to stop serving students who are likely to have problems in persistence, or

  alternatively, it could create an incentive to lower academic standards."

- More reliable data on college persistence can be found in federal longitudinal surveys

  that followed postsecondary students over six years.

- The data show that personal issues students face—finances, family background, family

  obligations and educational preparation before college—are the barriers to college

  persistence. The same data indicated that institutional quality is not a significant factor

  impeding student persistence.

- These data suggest that public policies can alleviate students' financial and educational

  impediments and thus can play a significant role in improving persistence.

This study appears to be written primarily to defend against a potential initiative to count graduation rates as a key indicator of a college's success. There are many important points made within the study, such as its pointing out that growing numbers of students no longer follow a straight line to a degree, with more and more stretching out their education, attending part-time or intermittently and/or attending more than one school. As they point out, U.S. higher education allows second and third chances, allowing students to move in and out over a lifetime.

While this study provides valuable data, one statement appears to represent the overall tone of the study that the student is far more responsible for poor persistence rates than colleges. It states, "As we have seen, institutional factors are much less important than student factors in determining persistence" (p. 15). This position conflicts with other research (Astin 1984, Bean 1980, Braxton 2008, McGiveny 2004, Tinto 1993, 2005) that asserts colleges play a significant role in persistence. The AFT stance is reminiscent of the view Tinto (2005) attributes to the early 70's where the standard was that students failed, not institutions. The study also states that "a fair reading of the data suggests there is not a general problem of student persistence in higher education" (p. 12), a claim that conflicts with a majority of other research cited here.

The study addresses age, stating that older students (not defined) generally have a family and job that compete with college and extend the time to graduation or reduce the chances of graduating. They point out it is not age itself that accounts for the higher dropout rate, but the associated risk factors common among older students such as: part-time enrollment, delaying entry, not having a regular High School diploma, having children, being a single parent, being financially independent of parents, and working

full-time. These "risk-factors" are unsupported in the AFT study and are of

undetermined validity.

        If indeed the AFT report accurately represents the views of college instructors

then its value in understanding institutional views of student persistence is unmatched, as

no other studies claim to represent such a large number of instructors. If the report's

statement that "institutional factors are *much less important* [italics added] than student

factors in determining persistence" (p. 16) accurately reflects the majority view of AFT's

membership, then it may well support and explain Braxton's (2008) contention that

instructors often do not see student retention as their issue.

        This report provides strategies for enhancing support for nontraditional students,

including: (a) fostering a sense of community may be important so students do not feel

adrift; (b) students need access to tutorial support, adequate student aid, faculty advisors

and counselors to help solve problems and help students stay in school, (d) students who

have extra problems need extra help, and (e) vigorous outreach can make a difference.

Unfortunately, the report closes with a rather pessimistic statement, "However, many

institutions, especially open access colleges, don't have the staff and resources to

intervene" (AFT, 2003). Whether factual or not, the statement almost sounds like

surrender.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Adult Student Persistence</h2>

        Asserting there was no theoretical model available to guide attrition research on

the nontraditional student enrolled in institutions of higher education, Bean and Metzner

(1985) argued this mattered because nontraditional students were more affected by the

external environment than by social integration variables. They noted that the literature

overwhelmingly suggested that social integration was not an important factor in the

attrition process for non-traditional students. In the Bean and Metzner Attrition Model

for Non-traditional Students, they based the drop-out decision for nontraditional students

upon four sets of variables: background and defining variables, academic performance,

environmental variables, and the intent to leave.

As this study focuses on the role college experiences play in decisions on

persistence, the environmental variables would seem most pertinent, and Bean and

Metzner (1985) argued that for non-traditional students the environmental factors were

more important than academic ones. They proposed two compensatory impacts: (a) that

environmental support compensates for weak academic support, but academic support

will not compensate for weak environmental support; and (b) nonacademic factors

compensate for low levels of academic success, while high levels of academic

achievement will only result in continued attendance when accompanied by positive

psychological outcomes from school. This assertion will be an interesting one to

examine in analyzing the data this study will produce.

Bean and Metzner (1985) also postulated that various student background

variables including educational goals could affect the decision to drop out, either directly

or through indirect influence on academic performance variables and/or environmental

variables. Testing their model, Metzner and Bean (1987) found that non-traditional

students dropped out of college for academic reasons or because they were not committed

to attending the institution. This is an interesting finding, especially as it will relate to this

study. The participants in this study will have a history of at least two years of successful

academic performance, and although that does not guarantee academics will not be the

reason for leaving, it reduces its likelihood. That leaves, according to Metzner and

Bean's findings, only a lack of commitment to attending the institutions as a reason; a

factor that will be evaluated in analyzing the data received.

Studies regarding the differences in traditional and nontraditional students,

especially as related to their approaches to college and learning, provided insight on

perspectives but very little information on how those differences might impact decisions

on persistence. Knowles (1980) points out that adults are often more self-directed and

are more task and problem oriented in their learning approach. Astin (1977) noted that

older students appeared more academically oriented and interacted with faculty more

often than did traditional students. Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon (1993) found

that adult students' expectations of effective teaching were qualitatively different from

those of traditional students, placing greater emphasis on the relevancy of the material;

the instructor's openness to questions, and the instructor's show of concern for the

student's learning than traditional students. These findings will also be looked at through

the exploration of the role experiences in the classroom environment, and student and

advisor interactions play on persistence decisions.

Asserting that adult students differ from traditional students in qualitative ways

that should be recognized by instructors of adults, Richter-Antion (1986) says adults

attend college with a clear purpose in mind; in class because they want to be there

whereas younger students may be in school because of parental or peer pressure or

because going to college was the natural next step. This position seems a bit sweeping,

essentially portraying all adult students essentially as eager and driven, and younger ones

as just going with the flow, whereas in fact, as Kasworm (2005) points out, there is no

monolithic adult student. As adults, they can have both common and diverse experiences and beliefs, and along those lines, this researcher expects they can also have diverse approaches to college.

Likely reflecting the view of many adult students, Richter-Antion (1986) represents adult students as bucking the system by returning to school beyond the socially accepted time to do so. Kasworm (2008) refers to the adult students return to college as acts of hope. She refers to the adult purposefully deciding to be a college student as the first act of hope, one requiring courage and support to apply for admission, register for classes, and participate in collegiate courses. Their ongoing engagement in a collegiate environment is the second act of hope, because with competing lives, hopes, and realities, each semester represents either a renegotiation or adaptation of themselves and their lives. Kasworm sees the adult's engagement in learning new knowledge, new perspectives and potentially new beliefs as the third act of hope, and their willingness to face the challenges in gaining a place, position, and voice in the cultural worlds of higher education, as their final act of hope.

MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) developed an adult student attrition model entitled Adult Persistence in Learning (APIL). In brief, it called the successful persistence of adults in higher education a complicated response to a series of issues. The APIL model has ten factors representing issues of concern to adult learners. Five are related to personal issues: self-awareness, willingness to delay gratification, clarification of career and life goals, mastery of life transitions, and sense of interpersonal competence; two are related to learning: educational competence and intellectual competence; and three are related to environmental issues: information retrieval, awareness of opportunities and

impediments, and environmental compatibility. MacKinnon-Slaney presents these three components as influencing each other and students' decisions on persistence.

According to Donaldson et al. (1993) six frequently mentioned attributes adult learners expect of effective instructors are, to (a) be knowledgeable, (b) show concern for student learning, (c) present material clearly, (d) motivate, (e) emphasize relevance of class material, and (f) be enthusiastic. Imel (1995) asserts there are similarities in how adult and traditional students characterize good teaching but points out four instructor characteristics mentioned as important to adult students that were not among the top items for undergraduates, these were: (a) creates a comfortable learning atmosphere, (b) uses a variety of techniques, (c) adapts to meet diverse needs, and (d) dedicated to teaching.

Justice (1997) observed that the motivations of adults for continuing their education differ from traditional-aged students, and in fact that motivations tend to differ among adults as they progress through different age groups. Adults returning in their late 20's and 30's often return to school because of a need to have more expert knowledge in order to reach their personal or professional goals. Justice says that for those students, "academic achievement is both a public declaration of their qualification and a personal validation of generative capacity" (p. 30). He states that beyond age 40, adult learners' motivation for vocational education declines, but their desire to learn for personal growth begins to ascend, becoming more inclined to earn a degree for their own satisfaction and enrichment.

Interestingly, Justice (1997) was somewhat unique in addressing the notion that college attendance could be undertaken for one's own satisfaction and enrichment, as the

vast majority focus on education, including adult education being tied to job

advancement. Aslanian (as cited in Kasworm, 2003b) states that research indicates that

85% of adults report career reasons as their key college enrollment goal. As this

statement does not define "adults" I can neither support nor refute Aslanian's assertion,

however, my own views are more in line with those of Eduard Lindeman who in 1926

equated adult education to the quest for life's meaning, and stated he believed study was

undertaken for reasons outside of work advancement. Lindeman clearly held the adult

who would seek education for personal growth in high esteem, saying

> The adult able to break the habits of slovenly mentality and willing to devote
>
> himself seriously to study when study no longer holds forth the lure of pecuniary
>
> gain is, one must admit, a personality in whom many negative aims and desires
>
> have been eliminated (p. 10).

This position is not to imply a belief that all adults therefore enter education with

personal growth as a goal. As Justice (1997) also stressed, not everything adults bring to

class is positive, as they also bring an aging body and mind with cognitive processes that

operate differently than younger students. The adult students often have a fear of

quantitative reasoning and mathematics, and may have more trouble with short-term

memory. Perhaps most concerning is that some adult students, especially the males feel a

lowering of their status by becoming students again, however, as Justice points out, for

those who persevere there is usually a change in their perspective and motivation, as

these limitations can be mitigated by effective strategies that draw on experience and

successful cognitive habits. Justice also comments on the need for instructors to also

adjust to the older students, pointing out that faculty members need to respect these students as adults with significant and meaningful knowledge and skills.

McGivney (2004), the principal research officer at the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education in Leicester, United Kingdom, focuses her research primarily on adult students. She contends that there are differences in the issues that affect student persistence between traditional students and those in their 30's, 40's, 50's and older.

While continuing education refers to non-degree granting education in England, McGivney's research is still very applicable to the U.S.' college environment and both the degree and non-degree granting programs. She stresses we do not have enough information yet on adult students, which she accepts as being students above the age of 25 who have had a gap since completing full-time education. She is one of few researchers who have focused on the adult student, and the only one I have found who clearly states that these students' lifestyles, learning goals and aspirations are often qualitatively different from traditional students.

In trying to answer two questions, "Are retention rates of adult students different from those of younger students?" and "Are there significant differences in retention rates between different age cohorts?" McGivney (2004) admits it is tough, as study of the non-completion patterns of adults is comparatively limited. That point identifies one of McGivney's major beliefs; there is too little data on adult students, and I agree completely. As she puts it, there is a paucity of detailed data on retention, especially of mature students. In support she points out that over half of all students in higher education are over 25, therefore considered adult students, yet the institutional tracking pales in comparison to traditional students.

McGivney makes excellent points regarding the complexity of obtaining a realistic and useful database of information on adult student persistence, stressing there is a combination of interacting reasons that lead people to withdraw prematurely from college courses, and stressing that even when we do ask why (something we often do not do), we may get answers that are virtually useless. This potential result is influenced by the fact that people may have multiple simultaneous or combined reasons but will often provide only the most recent one—the proverbial last straw (Cullen, 1994). In addition, sometimes the real reasons will not be uttered at all, as students may cite only reasons that do not threaten their self-esteem or that they perceive as socially acceptable (McGivney, 2004).

Noting that the main reasons often expressed by adult students for leaving a program are external to an institution, McGivney (2004) warns that does not mean schools should assume there is nothing they can do to help. Student dissatisfaction with a course or a school is also a common reason for non-completion, with students making the wrong choice of courses being a highly significant factor in early withdrawal. Her research identified specific difficulties as courses differing from what was advertised; course content differing substantially from what was advertised or expected; and other course options learned about after the fact, but too late to change (McGivney, 2004).

Personal factors must be considered for all students when looking at reasons they might leave, but as McGivney (2004) states, mature students are more likely to leave for "fact of life" reasons that deal with work, home, family, caring responsibilities or health. Sustained study in adulthood can be interrupted by many issues that are more likely to occur with the above 25 adult than the younger traditional students, yet most college

programs make no adjustment for that possibility, instead seeming to take an almost

adversarial role, outlining the negative consequences for missing class, versus supportive

guidance on how to make-up missed work.

McGivney (2004) also addresses the impact of gender differences on adult

students, explaining that men traditionally cite more course, finance, or work related

reasons for leaving, whereas women are more likely to withdraw due to family

commitments. Another concern for adult student persistence is a lack of family or

partner support, another issue potentially worse for women, but with adult courses more

commonly being held in the evening, all adult students can be seen as being at school

when they "should be" home (McGivney, 2004). As this study seeks participants of both

genders, it will be interesting to see if the interviews and analysis reveal different

perceptions of college experiences along gender lines.

In "Staying or Leaving the Course," McGivney (1996), advises that in looking at

adult students who leave college programs before completion, evidence suggests that too

many receive little or no advice before starting an advanced course; find course content

and workloads more demanding than they anticipated; and often fail to notify institutions

that they are leaving or give the real reasons for leaving. This issue potentially highlights

the value of effective academic advising as discussed in ACT studies cited earlier (2004,

2010). It also highlights various aspects of this study's focus, including support services,

and student and advisor interactions.

McGivney (2004) cites a few examples of poor college practices as related to

helping learners: Perfunctory interviews, cancelled courses with students put in the "next

best thing" without discussion; and insufficient help for learners who got on the wrong

track. While these may appear to be relatively minor incidents, they can be more

significant to a learner who is already encountering some of the stressors not uncommon

for adult students. She further cites institutions that are not "adult friendly" as a reason

for leaving school. As she points out, some mature students feel alienated when their

existing skills and experiences are not taken into account or when their outside

commitments are ignored, an atmosphere that can lead to resentment and early

withdrawal (McGivney, 2004).

College Experiences Influence on Student Persistence

As budgets tighten, competition for students increases, resources shrink and

regents, legislatures, taxpayers, and prospective students and their families take

up the cry for institutional accountability, institutions that put students first will

succeed, even excel, just as their students will (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999,

p. 31).

The above quote may raise the question, at what cost should colleges put students

first, as one may worry that it can be taken to extreme. The television, radio, internet ads

and billboards are replete with an ever-growing number of colleges touting their singular

focus on the students. Most also provide student testimonials, touting how easily they

earned their degree in minimal time, at minimal cost, while working full time, getting

credit for all their experience, receiving free lap-tops, and so on. This trend is pointed

out, not to argue against the Levitz et al. (1999) quote, but to admit a personal bias that

the quality of education needs protecting while institutions grapple with providing more

accessible, pertinent, and rewarding education.

In moving from the literature on adult student persistence in general to focusing more directly on literature that addresses how college experience may influence persistence, this section looks at five main areas of interaction that are introduced to the participants during the interviews. These areas are: business processes, support services, student/advisor interactions, classroom environment, and feelings of fit. The first two, business processes and support services are often addressed together in the literature and as such will be addressed together here.

Business Processes and Support Services

Interestingly, the research on how college business processes and support services may influence student persistence is some of the most recent found, perhaps due in part to the focus on the role colleges play in persistence being relatively new, especially in comparison to the focus being on student responsibility as Tinto (1975) addressed in his earliest research.

Bean (2005) uses the terms business procedures or bureaucratic factors in referring to the interaction that occurs between students and the service providers at a college. This interaction can include student exchanges with various offices on a campus to sign up for classes, pay tuition, obtain a student ID or parking pass, and the like. It also can include visits to various offices related to the area of study to obtain various registration forms, add/drop slips, and others. These various exchanges can lead to students becoming discouraged if they perceive bureaucracy as more important to college staff than student service.

Calling the bureaucratic aspects of colleges "soulless, deadening students whose spirits should be lifted by their academic experiences," Bean (2005, p. 230) points out

that students can become disenfranchised when they feel they have been given the run-around or misled, causing them to develop negative attitudes toward their schools, and therefore being less likely to remain until graduating. Beyond general recommendations to establish student-friendly business processes, no real specifics were found in the research, however, in the area of student support services, researchers were more forthcoming.

In addressing support services, Miller et al. (2005) assert students should rightfully expect colleges to provide services to help them succeed, and Kuh, Kinzie, Whitt, and Associates (2005) state that schools desiring to increase student persistence should implement and advocate the use of learner-centered support services. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) point out that services such as tutoring centers that offer academic assistance are intended to promote student persistence, and Adelman (1990) asserts that such services produce statistically significant positive impacts on student persistence.

The topic of academic advising as part of student support services received a lot of attention in the research. Habley (1994) stated "Academic Advising is the only structured activity on the campus in which all students have the opportunity for one-to-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution" (p. 10). Tinto (1987) stated that effective retention programs now understand that academic advising is the core of successful institutional efforts to educate and retain students.

ACT studies also reported on what colleges reported regarding the importance of academic advising, with a collaborative ACT and AASCU study (Cowart, 1987), citing academic advising programs as a retention strategy identified by over 70% of all colleges responding to the study. In "What Works In Student Retention" the fourth national

survey (ACT, 2004) statistics showed that colleges reported academic advising as one of

the three main efforts responsible for contributing to student retention, and McGivney

(1996) found that many students who leave college before achieving their goals received

little or no advice prior to leaving.

Ramzi, Bechara, and Kamal (2008) addressed student awareness of support

services, finding that students who felt they had higher knowledge of the services

available to them, were generally more inclined to be satisfied than other students.

Interestingly, their study found seniors in general were less satisfied with programs and

services than freshmen students were. This presents a question of whether the freshmen

were more aware of the services, or if the seniors had discovered the services were less

than advertised. Despite its somewhat limited focus in the literature, the research clearly

supports that at least one aspect of support services, in this case academic advising, can

influence persistence and as such, earned support services a place in this study.

Student and Advisor Interactions

Studies on doctoral student attrition highlight the importance of student and

advisor interactions, with the doctoral advisor being called one of the most important

persons, if not the most important for students to develop a relationship with (Baird,

1995). Chun-Mei et al., (2007) assert that the student-advisor relationship is one of the

most important aspects of doctoral education, and Lovitts (2001) found that

unsatisfactory interactions between students and advisors was implicated in students'

decisions to leave school without completing their degrees. Unfortunately, Milem and

Berger (2000) found from their study of faculty time allocation that faculty members

spent less time working with and advising students in 1992 than they did in 1972.

Girves and Wemmerus (1988) concluded that the more interactions doctoral students had with their advisors, the more likely they were to progress through their programs. O'Bara (1993) found from her research with 123 doctoral degree completers and 107 non-completers that the students who completed their degrees described more positive interactions with their dissertation chairs than did non-completers. She also found that completers rated their advisors as more approachable, more helpful, and more understanding than did non-completers.

Habley's (1994) comments mentioned previously under Business Processes and Support Services, regarding academic advising providing the opportunity for students to interact one-to-one with a concerned representative of the college apply just as well when referring to the more formal Student and Advisor Interactions. Noel et al. (1985) put this into perspective stating,

> It is the people who come face-to-face with students on a regular basis who provide the positive growth experiences for students that enable them to identify their goals and talents and learn how to put them to use. The caring attitude of college personnel is viewed as the most potent retention force on a campus. (p. 17)

Focusing more directly on doctoral students, Tinto (1993) argued that like undergraduate attrition and retention, the phenomenon of doctoral student attrition is probably best understood as the interaction between the student and the educational organization. He explains doctoral student attrition as involving three general stages: Stage one is the student's transition to membership in the graduate community. and he sees attrition as the result of low rates of social and academic interactions in the

department and low commitment to degree goals. In stage two, attaining of candidacy,

he attributes attrition to inadequate interactions concerning students' academic

competence, and in stage three, active research, Tinto believes that the behavior of a

specific faculty member or members is a determining factor.

Barnes and Austin (2009) suggest that the role of advisors include: being the

source of reliable information, departmental socializer, advocate, role model, and

occupational socializer. Golde (1998, 2005) discovered that the student/advisor

relationships of non-completers had problematic features stemming from mismatched

expectations and working styles.

Classroom Environment

All adult students attending classes on a college campus will undoubtedly have

college experiences in all five of the focus areas looked at in this study, but none more-so

than the classroom. That is not to presume those experiences will be the most

remarkable, but certainly the most plentiful. As stated at the outset, this focus area also

covers the broadest range, as it encompasses all aspects of the classroom, from the

physical setting, to the instructor influenced aspects, even the student to student

experiences.

Braxton et al. (2000) assert that teaching practices of college and university

faculty play a significant role in the college student departure process. This role holds

importance for both our understanding of the process of college student departure and for

the improvement of institutional retention rates. Braxton (2006) argues that students

experience success in college in multiple ways, with eight domains of success existing:

- Academic attainment,

- Acquisition of general education,

- Development of academic competence,

- Development of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions,

- Occupational attainment,

- Preparation for adulthood and citizenship,

- Personal accomplishments, and

- Personal development.

Explaining that course-level learning is a fundamental contributor to six of these eight, Braxton et al. (2000) exclude only personal accomplishments, and personal development. They also addressed specific ways the college environment influences student persistence decisions, identifying forces that influence social integration in particular. Citing Tinto (1999) who contended that if social integration is to occur, it must occur in the classroom, Braxton et al., asserted that the college classroom constitutes a possible source of influence on social integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and college departure. Noting that scholars had begun to recognize the role of the classroom in the college student departure process, specifically, the direct influence of classroom-based academic experiences of students on their withdrawal, they addressed the faculty use of active learning practices as a source of influence on student departure in general and social integration in particular. This illustrates the value of looking at the classroom as part of college experiences and their role in students' decisions on persistence.

Braxton and Munday (2001-2002) call for a multi-theoretical approach to the student retention and attrition because it is an ill-structured problem that defies single

solutions. Among the most direct studies of this problem was Tinto's Interactionalist

Theory; where he viewed student departure as a longitudinal process occurring because

of the meanings students ascribe to their interactions with the formal and informal

dimensions of a school (Tinto, 1986, 1993). These interactions occur between the

students and the academic and social systems of schools (Braxton, 2004).

        Perhaps responding to the Braxton, Hirschy, et al. (2004) argument that his theory

did not appropriately explain student departure in residential and commuter colleges,

Tinto (2005) stated researchers now understand that the process of retention differs in

different institutional settings. Pointing out that from studying persistence in non-

residential settings, we now appreciate the importance of involvement in the classroom

for student retention, he added that the classroom is for many students, "the one place,

perhaps the only place, where they meet each other and the faculty. If involvement does

not occur there, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere" (p. 3).

        Calling his own research "the first to clearly link educational innovations that

shape classroom practice both to heightened forms of engagement and to student

persistence" (Tinto, 2005, p. 4) clearly supports the importance of experiences in the

classroom environment on students' decisions on persistence. It is now a widely

accepted notion that the actions of the faculty as key to student retention, and although

student retention is everyone's business, it is especially the business of faculty (Tinto,

2005). Tinto added, "regrettably, too few faculty see this to be the case" (p. 4).

        A survey of 172,000 faculty in the U.S. found that 76 percent list lecture as their

primary instructional method (Finkelstein, Seal, & Schuster, 1998). Braxton et al,

(2008), citing their earlier research on the role of active learning in college student

persistence, assert that students who frequently encounter active learning in their courses perceive themselves as gaining knowledge and understanding from their course work, such students may be more likely to view their collegiate experience as personally rewarding. Active learning is described as any class activity that "involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2) and includes discussion, questions faculty ask in class, cooperative learning, debates, role playing, and questions faculty ask on tests. There is no guarantee personally rewarding coursework equates to persistence, but it seems far more likely to than unrewarding coursework would.

Braxton et al. (2008), suggest that faculty teaching behaviors that affect student learning should be the focus of further research and that teaching behaviors might best include various teaching methods, the application of principles of good practice, and adherence to norms governing teaching role performance. They support this argument with the seven principles of good practice as described by Chickering and Gamson (1999) as methods that might also positively influence social integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and departure decisions. These principles are:

- Encouragement of faculty-student contract,

- Encouragement of cooperation among students,

- Encouragement of active learning,

- Prompt feedback,

- Emphasizing time on task,

- Communicating high expectations, and

- Respect for diverse talents and ways of knowing.

Looking at college teaching from a less positive light, Braxton, Bayer, and Noseworthy (2004) offer the hypothesis that "Faculty violations of the proscriptive norms of inattentive planning, inadequate course design, insufficient syllabus, uncommunicated course details, inadequate communication, condescending negativism, personal disregard, and particularistic grading negatively affect the academic and intellectual development of undergraduate college students" (p. 43). This researcher believes these violations would negatively affect the academic and intellectual development of all students, not just undergraduates.

Braxton (2008) and Tinto (2005) contend that college faculty do not view student retention as their responsibility, viewing efforts to increase retention as an instrumental goal not a substantive one such as enhancing student learning. As a consequence, many disregard student retention as their responsibility. He recommends that those in schools who are responsible for faculty development should develop workshops, seminars, and discussion groups that assist faculty members in acquiring the knowledge and skills to successfully incorporate active learning methods in classes. Without this effort, Braxton believes instructors will merely teach in the same manner in which they were taught.

Tinto (1993) clearly stated, "Though it is evident that classrooms matter, especially as they may shape academic integration, little has been done to explore *how* the experience of the classroom matters, how it comes, over time, to shape student persistence" (p. 509).

Student Feelings of Fit

The concept of student-institution fit is a difficult one to define. When Tinto (1975) talked of it, he referred more to the characteristics students brought with them to

college and their commitment to the college. In this study it is explored more as feelings

of belonging, acceptance and comfort, and it may well be influenced by experiences in all

of the other areas focused on in this study.

As referenced above, a 2010 ACT study showed student-institution fit as one of

only two, from a list of twenty-four institutional characteristics ranked by all colleges as

making a moderate or higher contribution to student attrition. Academic advising which

ties to student/advisor interactions and support services also made the short list for 4-year

public institutions.

Kennedy et al. (2000) found that many students persisted despite contrary

predictions because their feelings of fit with the institution compensated for academic

performance. Sissel et al. (2001) point out that most colleges do not view their student

population as older, married, and working, and as a result adult students live on the

borderlands, believed to be apart from the collegiate world of young adult development.

In 1990, Kasworm addressed this in a way that really strikes at the challenge of fit,

asserting that adults view themselves as experts in their own domains of life. "Adults do

not live apart; rather, they are a part of their world" (p. 366), a point that supports the

importance of adult students feeling part of, not apart from the colleges they attend.

A 2004 ACT study looking at the role of academic and non-academic factors in

improving college retention found that even when students master course content, if they

fail to develop adequate academic self- confidence, academic goals, institutional

commitment, and social support and involvement, they may still be at risk of dropping

out. The study stressed that traditional reliance on academic performance as an indicator

of student persistence may miss students who are at risk due to other, non-academic

factors. It also offered retention suggestions including that schools should determine

their student characteristics and needs, set priorities among these areas of need, identify

available resources, and implement a formal, comprehensive retention program that best

meets their institutional needs, and that schools need to take an "integrated approach that

incorporates academic and non-academic factors in the design and development of

programs to create a socially inclusive and supportive academic environment that

addresses the social, emotional, and academic needs of students" (Lotkowski et al., 2004,

p. viii).

The Influence of Expectations and Perceptions

In a review of literature conducted after identifying the importance of students'

expectations and perceptions in influencing their decisions on persistence, I found the

book, *Promoting Reasonable Expectations: Aligning Student Institutional Views of the*

College Experience (Miller et al., 2005) an excellent resource. This book details a

project that examined students' expectations and compared them with what Miller et al.

refer to as "the realities of the student experiences" (p. xiii). While the project looked at

traditional students in undergraduate programs, this study on 40 to 65 year old students

primarily attending graduate programs suggests the data provided on the influence of

students' expectations and perceptions applies well to both populations.

Howard (2005) defines expectations not as hopes, but rather as what we

realistically anticipate, and asserts that students have expectations about college life,

guided by questions they ask in relation to their expectations, such as, "Is this what I

expected or not?" "Can I be successful here?" "Is this a good fit for me?" And "How

does this apply to me?"   In discussing expectations, Howard explains that when we look

back in time we remember what we experienced and interpret the meaning of those

experiences through that framework, and when looking to the future, the framework of

schemas guides, shapes and provides our anticipations. In other words, "our past

experiences create expectations of what will happen in the future" (Howard, 2005, p. 21).

In tying expectations to perceptions, Howard (2005) asserts that the expectations

individuals bring with them completely determine their perceptions and evaluations of

the new experiences. As Howard explains, expectations are not merely rational, mental

representations of past experiences because they also include affective components of

past experiences that factor into students' abilities to engage the challenges of the college

environment. Another important point Howard makes regarding expectations is that they

are always in flux, continuously being revised as new experiences are faced.

This information on how students' expectations and perceptions can influence

their college experiences provides an additional perspective in looking at students'

college experiences. This perspective is included in the overall analysis of data.

Summary

The secret of successful retention programs is no secret at all, but a reaffirmation

of some of the important foundations of higher education. There is no great secret

to successful retention programs, no mystery which requires unraveling. Though

successful retention programming does require some skill and not an

inconsiderable amount of effort, it does not require sophisticated machinery. It is

within the reach of all institutions if they only give serious attention to the

character of their educational mission and the obligation it entails. In short,

successful retention is no more than, but certainly no less than, successful

education. (Tinto, 1987, p. 18)

Tinto's statement seems to make retention a fairly simple process, colleges just

need to successfully educate their students, but as the continuing loss of students shows,

accomplishing that task is challenging. Since the early 1970's, when retention activities

and research became more prominent, postsecondary institutions have placed increasing

emphasis on the search for programs, policies, and strategies that would increase

retention rates.

This review of literature indicates that such retention practices have evolved over

the years. Early interventions were designed to diminish attrition and concentrated on

singular programs or services, chiefly in the domain of academic services. Most placed

the responsibility for attrition squarely on the shoulders of the students, ignoring or

denying any significant role of the colleges themselves. That approach was followed by

an integration of several programs and services including the combining of academic

services with those of student affairs. More recently, holistic approaches encompassing

academic affairs, student affairs, and administration (Borland, 2002) have become the

norm. Long-time researchers such as Tinto who began research into student persistence

in the 1970's, have moved from the practice of looking at what Braxton, Hirschy, et al.

(2004) call the Departure Puzzle as a failure of students, to exploring the important role

colleges themselves have in matters of student persistence.

As is clear, the search for understanding factors influencing persistence is not

new, it has been going on for over a hundred years. The importance of looking at this

with a focus on adult students and how colleges impact persistence is not new either, as

Lindeman captured it pretty well in 1926 when he said, "Adult learners are precisely

those whose intellectual aspirations are least likely to be aroused by the rigid,

uncompromising requirements of authoritative, conventionalized institutions of learning"

(p. 28). Lindeman's representation of college requirements as uncompromising and of

the colleges themselves as authoritative sounds rather severe, but if even remotely

reflective of today's colleges, it supports the idea that students' college experiences could

clearly influence their decisions on persistence.

This study and its specific focus on how college experiences, as perceived by

adult students, influence their decisions on persistence, attempts to bring the informed

ideas of others to bear in guiding this research. Furthermore, it is important to note that

although Lindeman's comments above, as well as some others discussed herein are

largely negative, each area of experience explored in this study was approached carefully,

looking for any perceptions the students had of the experience, be that positive, neutral,

or negative.

As this literature review has highlighted, Tinto has been one of the most prolific

researchers in this area and also one of the most willing to continually reevaluate the data.

His research over the last three decades clearly asserts that students' engagement with

their colleges plays a critical role in the students' decisions on persistence, but his

findings have evolved. While his interactionalist model of student persistence (1975)

placed major emphasis on factors related more to the student than the college, his

research in the 80's and since has increasingly identified students' experiences with their

colleges as playing a major role in their decisions on persistence. In 1993, he specifically

called student departure a longitudinal process that occurs because of the meanings

students ascribe to their interactions with the college. Tinto's openness to continually collect and analyze data, and where appropriate support new findings is reassuring.

        At the outset, I engaged to identify key areas of college experience for adult students, Using the extensive research of others reviewed in the preceding pages, a small pilot study (Gaither & Locke, 2009), and personal experience, I selected five main focus areas for this study: business processes, support services, student/advisor interaction, classroom environment, and feelings of fit. The following paragraphs illustrate how the literature review informed the planning for this study.

        The review of business processes was influenced by research such as Bean's (2005) writing where he used the terms business procedures and bureaucratic factors in referring to the interaction between students and service providers at colleges. Calling the bureaucratic aspects soulless, Bean asserted that students can become discouraged if they perceive bureaucracy as more important to the college staff than student service. He also commented on the potential negative influence if students feel they have been misled.

        Other research used the term "business" or "business processes" but the references were primarily used in discussing responsibilities of faculty and staff, not in relation to the business processes intended here. Clearly this area of potential college experience received little attention from other researchers addressing persistence. Regardless, all students must engage with the college business processes to be a college student, and for that reason it is explored here for evidence that students perceive their experiences with colleges' business processes as influencing their decisions on persistence.

In exploring support services, this study refers to tutoring, academic advising, and health care as examples of common support services, but this researcher explained to all participants that the term should be considered to encompass any sort of service they perceived the college as providing to them as students. The majority of literature on support services dealt with academic advising and was provided by ACT. One such report, a collaborative ACT and AASCU study (Cowart, 1987), cited academic advising programs as a retention strategy identified by over 70% of responding colleges. A 2004 ACT study showed that colleges reported academic advising as one of three main efforts responsible for contributing to student retention. McGivney (1996) found that too many students who leave college before achieving their goals received little or no advice. Milem and Berger (2000) found that faculty spent less time advising students in 1992 than they had in 1972.

Despite its somewhat limited focus in the literature, the existing research clearly supports that at least one aspect of support services, in this case academic advising, can influence persistence and as such, earned support services a place in this study.

The literature on the importance of student and advisor interactions is discussed primarily in studies addressing doctoral students and their advisors. While other students may have advisors, the benefit of positive interactions between doctoral students and their advisors is obvious due to the extensive coordination needed in completing a dissertation. The fact the relationship is so important is highlighted by the fact that doctoral students are the least likely to complete their academic goals (Gilliam & Kritsonis, 2006), with a recurring attrition rate of at least 40% (Golde, 2005).

Lovitts (2001) points out that there are virtually no academic differences between doctoral student completers and non-completers and found that unsatisfactory interactions between students and advisors was implicated in students' decisions to leave without achieving their goals. The research shows a clear link between doctoral student and advisor interactions and degree completion, with Girves and Wemmerus (1988) concluding that the more interactions between the two, the more likely the students would progress through their programs. O'Bara (1993) found that those who did complete their program rated their advisors as more approachable, helpful and understanding than did those who left. Clearly this is an appropriate area of experience for exploration.

There is a wealth of research on how experiences within the classroom environment influence persistence. Braxton et al. (2000) assert that the teaching practices play a significant role in the student departure process and call for faculty use of active learning practices to positively influence student persistence. Tinto (2005), differing significantly from his writings in the mid-seventies points out that researchers now appreciate the importance of involvement in the classroom for student retention. In one of the most powerful statements on the topic, Tinto explains that the classroom is for many students, "the one place, perhaps the only place, where they meet each other and the faculty. If involvement does not occur there, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere" (p.3).

Other research on students' experiences in the classroom environment address the role of the type of learning presented in the classroom (Braxton et al., 2008), but as Barefoot (2004) comments, the impact of course formats and styles of instruction on student persistence has been woefully ignored. Still, others like Chickering and Gamson (1999) offer principles of good practice for the classroom. Perhaps most telling is

Braxton (2008) and Tinto's (2005) contention that college faculty do not view student

retention as their responsibility, a contention that if accurate could significantly and

negatively influence student persistence.

The area, student feelings of fit, was defined for this study as students having a

sense of belonging, comfort, and acceptance as part of their college experience. This was

selected in part based upon literature on topics commonly enveloped under this title, and

in part to explore any other aspect of feelings of fit not clearly addressed in the research.

The literature includes research such as Spady's (1970) and Tinto's (1975) that

called student social integration, integral to student persistence in college, and Astin's

(1984, 1993) that linked student involvement with enhanced student retention. However,

beyond calling for more student-student and student-faculty interaction, this research did

little to address other issues potentially influencing students' feelings of fit. Later studies

such as Naretto (1995) more clearly defined the college's role in students' feelings of fit,

stating that a supportive college community was critical in adult persistence.

Interestingly Cleveland-Innes (1994) had found that academic integration factors were

related to adult student persistence but social factors were not. This conflict in the

research findings highlights the importance of looking at the role students' feelings of fit

have on their persistence decisions.

Obviously no one definition can fully capture feelings of fit for all students, as

that is likely a very personal matter. Accordingly, this study tries to keep the topic open

to let the participants explore it they wish. As Kennedy et al. (2000) found, students can

persist based largely on their feelings of fit within the college despite predicted poor

academic performance, and as Kasworm (1990) asserted, adults view themselves as

experts in their own domains of life, both points that support that feelings of fit matter to adult students.

This researcher asserts that virtually any aspect of the college experience can potentially influence students' feelings of fit, an argument supported in part by Noel (1976), who pointed out that the admissions process, personal contacts with advisors, and students' expectations can all play a role. This literature review provided so much more valuable data than can be included in one dissertation and as such required this researcher to be very selective in what is actively brought into this study. This summary alone includes reference to literature on the role of active learning, however, this study will not go into comparing and contrasting teaching styles beyond collecting data on what aspects of the classroom environment might influence adult students' decisions on persistence. Additionally, there is significant difference of opinion between research studies on which has the most influence on persistence; student characteristics or college environment. While this researcher accepts that student characteristics play a role, it sets out to explore what role the college environment plays in those important decisions, but does not try to prove which is more influential.

As stated earlier, this study is different from others in three key areas, summarized as: it focuses only on adult students between 40 and 65 years old; it looks exclusively at voluntary attrition; and it explores what role college experiences, as perceived by these students, played in their decisions on persistence. The literature reviewed for this study has also informed each of these areas.

As to the age of the participants, as McGivney (2004) stressed there is little data on retention of mature students, but that said, this age group was selected due to its

expanding numbers in colleges and to explore the potential that they had a different

approach to college than more traditional students.   Richter-Antion (1986) contends that

adult students attend college with a clear purpose in mind, attending because they want to

be there whereas younger students may be in school because of parental or peer pressure

or because going to college was the natural next step. Knowles (1980), points out that

adults are often more self-directed and task and problem oriented in their learning

approach, and Astin (1977) noted older students appeared more academically oriented

and interacted with faculty more often than did traditional students.

Donaldson et al. (1993) found that adult students' expectations of effective

teaching were qualitatively different from those of traditional students, placing greater

emphasis on the relevancy of the material; the instructor's openness to questions, and the

instructor's show of concern for the student's learning than traditional students.

McGivney (2004) offers that mature students may feel alienated when their existing skills

and experiences are not taken into account or when their outside commitments are

ignored, an atmosphere that can lead to resentment and early withdrawal.

Finally, in looking at what role college experiences, as perceived by the students,

played in their decisions on persistence, this literature review examined experiences in

the five main areas identified for this study. It is important to note that the wording *as*

perceived by the students is intentional and important, as it is intended to stress that this

study looks at students' perceptions of their experiences, not necessarily at the

interactions as concrete events.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study explores how college experiences, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions on persistence. Specifically, it looks at what role the students' perceptions of their college experiences play in their decisions to either continue to enroll in classes, or to voluntarily depart without completing their degree. The decision to stay or depart is one that students must make each semester. For some such as traditional students on a linear path from high school through a college degree, or others with precise goals and timelines, this may seem a fairly automatic process, but the fact remains, it is every student's decision to make.

This chapter explains the research methods used in this study, looking at the research design, sampling strategy, participants, data collection, and data analyses techniques. In describing the research design, there is first an explanation of why qualitative research was selected over quantitative, then why grounded theory was selected over other qualitative methods. This chapter also explains the choice of a purposeful sampling strategy, and details how typical and snowball sampling was used in this study. This chapter also includes an explanation of the use of focus group and one-on-one interviews to collect the data.

In describing the data analysis, I explain the use of Strauss and Corbin's (1998) open, axial and selective coding to develop categories of phenomena important to the participants, and how this analysis led to the selection of a central category. I also explain how the process then led to the construction of a theory to explain how college

experiences influence adult students' decisions on persistence. In closing, the stories of

several participants are used to illustrate the process of developing one of the categories.

Qualitative research was selected over quantitative for this study primarily

because it is better suited to focus more on the *why* and *how* of issues, the very points this

study investigates regarding adult students' persistence. Quantitative research methods

provide valuable data on who left college, and when, but cannot easily go as far in-depth

as to why they left; that exploration is left to the primary data collection tool in

qualitative research, the researcher.

Personal interviews are used to explore greater details of the *why* behind adult

students' decisions, and to identify factors not listed in the current limited research. The

interview is critical to this process and is used to provide a voice to the participants, an

important aspect because as Golde (1994) pointed out, those voices are rarely heard.

These interviews also provide the means to collect the critical data needed to analyze and

understand how people interpret their experiences. As the researcher for this study, I am

particularly familiar with the topic and the target research audience based on my own

status as an adult student.

This study uses personal interviews to gather data on how students' make sense of

their experiences and how that sense making influences their decisions on persistence, an

approach that is in line with Crotty's (1998) assertion that meaning is constructed by

people as they engage in, and interpret their world. It also coincides well with Merriam's

(2009) and Creswell's (1998) comments on interpretive research and constructivism as

discussed in Chapter One. A goal of this research is to find and understand how

participants made meaning of their experiences as related to their decisions regarding persistence.

Research Design

Merriam (2009) lists six common qualitative research approaches: basic qualitative research, grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography, narrative analysis and critical qualitative research. This study primarily uses basic qualitative research and grounded theory with some aspects of other methods influencing the data collection and analysis. Prior to deciding to proceed with basic qualitative research using grounded theory analysis methods, I examined the six that Merriam listed.

Phenomenology uses open-ended questions as I do in this study but it was not selected because it is really best suited for studying emotional and intense experiences, whereas this study looks at all aspects of students' experiences. Ethnography focuses on a group or culture (Fetterman, 1998) to understand how it influences the experiences. It was not used because although this study looks at a sub-group of students, they do not meet ethnography's view of a culture. As with narrative analysis (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) I do listen to participants' stories but did not choose the method because my focus is far more limited, seeking only to hear of college experiences rather than full stories from beginning to end. And finally, I did not select critical research (Patton, 2002) despite the common goal of understanding society, in this case college experiences, because unlike critical research, I did not have a goal of critiquing a phenomenon or causing change. That said, it is hoped the findings on how students' perceptions of their college experiences influence their decisions on persistence will be useful to colleges in enhancing college retention programs.

Providing an overview of basic qualitative research is a fairly simple undertaking in that Caelli, Ray, and Mill (2003) capture it quite well in just a few lines, referring to it as "that which is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies" (p. 4). Merriam (2009) provides a bit more detail, explaining that a central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds, therefore she asserts that constructionism underlies basic qualitative research, with the researcher being interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved. As Merriam states, "Researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 23). The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences, and as Merriam further explains, although the description includes all qualitative research, other types have additional dimensions.

At the outset, this study uses a basic qualitative approach because it provided the greatest flexibility to modify data collection and analysis as might be needed. However, it relies heavily on grounded theory methods of data collection and data analysis with the intent to conduct a full grounded theory research study if the data supports development of a central category. With this consideration in mind, a more detailed overview of grounded theory is provided.

Grounded Theory Overview

Grounded theory is defined by Creswell (2008) as a "systematic, qualitative procedure used to generate a theory that explains a process, an action, or an interaction

about a substantive topic" (p. 432). It is differentiated from other types of qualitative

research in its focus on building theory; which as the name suggests, is grounded in the

data. A better understanding of the theory results from breaking it into smaller parts and

looking at the background on its development.

Grounded theory's theoretical underpinnings are derived from pragmatism

(Dewey, 1925; Mead, 1934 as cited in Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and symbolic

interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Hughes, 1971; Park & Burgess, 1921; Thomas &

Znaniecki, 1918 as cited in Corbin & Strauss, 1990) with two principles being central to

the theory. The first being that phenomena are not seen as static but as continually

changing in response to evolving conditions and therefore change must be part of the

grounded theory process. The second is that actors be seen as having the means to

control their destinies by their responses to conditions. In other words, they are able to

make choices based on their perceptions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).   All of this goes to

explain that grounded theory seeks to uncover relevant conditions and to determine how

actors respond to the conditions and to the consequences of their actions.

Understanding the Terms

As stated, grounded theory uses *open, axial* and *selective coding*, as an analytical

process to identify concepts; group them under conceptual labels called categories;

develop the categories by identifying their subcategories and relating them along their

properties and dimensions; identifying the central category; and forming theory (Strauss

& Corbin, 1998).

That single paragraph presents a great deal of information that needs some explanation to make sense, beginning with a brief explanation of the terms, which is followed by more detail to demystify grounded theory research.

- *Open coding* is "the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data." (Strauss & Corbin (1998, p. 101).

- *Axial coding* is the "process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed axial because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 123).

- *Selective coding* is the "process by which all categories are unified around a 'core' category, and categories that need further explication are filled-in with descriptive detail" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14).

- *Concepts* represent a "labeled phenomenon…an abstract representation of an event, object, action/interaction that a researcher identifies as being significant in the data" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 103).

- C*ategories* stand for phenomena which represent a problem, issue, event, or happening that is significant to the issue. It is essentially an abstract term that represents a group of data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

- S*ubcategories* are also categories, however, "rather than standing for the phenomenon itself…(they) answer questions about the phenomenon such as when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 125).

- *Properties* are "the general or specific characteristics or attributes of a category" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 117).

- *Dimensions* "represent the location of a property along a continuum or range" (Strauss

  & Corbin, 1998, p. 117).

The overview of the main terms used in grounded theory provides some insight

into the data collection and analysis processes, however, before beginning a more

detailed explanation, it is important to note that grounded theory is not necessarily a step-

by-step or linear process. Researchers conduct various aspects of grounded theory such

as open and axial coding simultaneously, and will return to earlier stages as necessary in

collecting more data or further analyzing previous data. That said, grounded theory

research begins with open coding.

Open coding. As Merriam (2009) states, open coding begins with the first

interview, taking that transcript and while reading it, jotting down notes, comments,

observations or queries about bits of data that strike the researcher as interesting,

potentially relevant, or important to a study. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to it as

uncovering, naming and developing concepts by opening the text and exposing the

thoughts, ideas and meanings it contains. Merriam says it is called open coding because

the researcher is open to anything at that point. Corbin and Strauss (1990) point out that

the open coding interpretive process of breaking the data down analytically provides new

insights by breaking through standard ways of thinking about or interpreting phenomena

in the data.

An important aspect of grounded theory is the use of the constant comparative

method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), and in open coding it refers to events, actions, and

interactions being compared with others for similarities and differences. As the codes

begin to accumulate, they are given conceptual labels allowing conceptually similar

events, actions and interactions to be grouped together under the title categories. Open

coding and the use of constant comparison helps researchers break through subjectivity

and bias because as Corbin and Strauss state, it "forces preconceived notions and ideas to

be examined against the data" (p. 83).

Axial coding. Open and axial coding are not sequential acts, as the researcher

does not stop coding for properties and dimensions while developing the relationships

between concepts. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) state, "they proceed quite naturally

together" (p. 136). It is during axial coding that categories are developed further as the

researcher continues to look for indications of categories and subcategories in the data.

The act of relating categories to subcategories is accomplished along the lines of their

properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Analyzing the data involves examination of both the actual words used by the

participants, and the researcher's conceptualization of those words (Strauss & Corbin,

1998). In further explaining axial coding, Strauss (1987) outlines its four basic tasks as,

(a) Laying out the properties of a category and their dimensions, a task that occurs during

open coding, (b) Identifying the variety of conditions, action/interactions, and

consequences associated with the phenomenon, (c) Relating a category to its

subcategories through statements denoting how they are related to each other, and (d)

Looking for cues in the data that denote how major categories might relate to each other.

Corbin and Strauss (1990) stress that data must alternately collect and analyze

data, meaning researchers cannot just collect all the data before starting analysis, because

analysis from one interview is intended to direct the researcher's focus in the next. This

is especially important because as Corbin and Strauss explain, single incidents are not

enough to support or refute a hypothesis; the phenomenon must occur repeatedly in the data. The constant comparison allows researchers, when identifying a potentially significant event, object, action/interaction in one interview, to seek to identify its presence in other data collection. To wait until all data is collected to start analysis would result in significant gaps in the eventual theory.

Selective coding. In grounded theory, the process of open and axial coding and constant comparison continues until categories are developed, complete with their subcategories, properties and dimensions, and no new properties or dimensions are being developed; a status referred to as *saturated*. This is when selective coding is introduced, as selective coding is the "process by which all categories are unified around a 'core' category, and categories that need further explication are filled-in with descriptive detail" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14). This is the process that integrates and refines the major categories to form a larger theoretical scheme and construct theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As Strauss and Corbin explain, the first step in integration is deciding on a central category, one that that pulls other categories together to form an explanatory whole (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It can evolve from a list of existing categories or researchers may determine that none of those tells the whole story and therefore a new more abstract term is needed.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) offer several criteria for choosing a central category and provide techniques to help researchers integrate the data such as writing the storyline, making use of diagrams, and reviewing and sorting memos. All of these go to assist the researcher in outlining the overarching theoretical scheme. Grounded theory then calls for the researcher to refine the theory which involves reviewing the scheme for internal

consistency and gaps in logic, filling in poorly developed categories and trimming excess ones, and validating the scheme.

Understanding the grounded theory "paradigm" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 128). As part of grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin refer to an organizational scheme they call the paradigm, which they then take pains to remove its mystery by stating "In actuality, the paradigm is nothing more than a perspective taken toward data, another analytic stance that helps to systematically gather and order data in such a way that structure and process are integrated" (p. 128). Put simply, the perspective is looking for conditions, actions/ interactions, and consequences, and although that may sound similar to the language of cause and effect, it is not the same as the analysis is not that simple (Strauss & Corbin. 1998). They use the example from a sample study, that easy access alone to drugs does not lead to drug use, although it might make them more available.

The paradigm has a potential role in looking at all participants' interviews in this study. Take Elise's feelings of anxiety towards the class, that alone does not necessarily result in poor communication, although it could play a role if her anxiety prevented Elise from expressing herself in a way that her professor could understand. Likewise, nothing would suggest a direct link between her professor's young age and her frustration when trying to explain to her professor why she did not get algebra. Again this is an example of why researchers look for relations between categories, not just at the case of one person, otherwise this research might report that adult students taking courses they are anxious about with young professors will result in frustration.

In early analysis researchers are coding for explanations to understand phenomena not for terms like condition, action/interaction, or consequence, and in fact the terms are

not so simple. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain, the components of the paradigm

used in examining the data include the phenomenon (represented in coding as categories),

a term that answers the question, what is going on here? The next component in the

paradigm are *conditions*, which are events or happenings that create the situations, issues,

and problems pertaining to a phenomenon.

The conditions can arise out of several possibilities such as time, place, culture,

rules, beliefs and the like, and especially pertinent to this study, they point out that

"unless research participants are extremely insightful, they might not know all of the

reasons why they do things, although they might give researchers some rationales for

their behavior" (p. 131).

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) observation that participants may not know why they

do things is an interesting relation to Cullen's (1994) statement that there could be

multiple simultaneous or combined reasons for students' decisions, often providing only

the most recent one, and McGivney's (2004) assertion that at times the real reasons will

not be uttered at all, as they may cite only those that do not threaten their self-esteem or

that they perceive as socially acceptable. Taken together, this suggests that participants

may not know why they do certain things, in part because there may be multiple

simultaneous or combined reasons, or because they are unwilling to cite the true reasons;

all issues that make analysis more challenging.

Participants and Sampling

Comings et al. (1999) refer to a study on persistence by the National Center for

the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) that indicated students over 30, and

parents of teenage or grown children were more likely to persist than others. Their study

suggested older students persist longer because they benefit from the maturity that comes with age and no longer having the responsibilities of caring for small children. With this in mind, this study researches adult students between 40 and 65 years who entered or returned to college after a significant gap in formal schooling, and who had previously successfully completed at least two years of college.

This subset of the adult student population was selected for study based on three primary expectations: First, lacking some of the more common distracters of younger students, these students' persistence would be less impacted by issues outside the purview of a college's influence. Second, their decisions to return to school, being made later in life rather than as a direct continuation of schooling, were deliberate and thoughtful decisions (an assumption based on personal experience and discussions with fellow 40 to 65 year old students). Third, their successful completion of other college courses reduced the likelihood that their decisions on persistence were significantly influenced by a lack of academic capability; a factor cited by college faculty as a primary reason for student attrition (AFT, 2003).

Having such specific requirements for participants led to the use of nonprobability sampling which Merriam (2009) explains is the method of choice for most qualitative research. This study logically called for using the most common form of nonprobability sampling that Patton (2002) calls *purposeful sampling,* describing its power as lying in the selection of information-rich cases from which researchers can learn a great deal about the issues central to the research. Here, the information-rich cases include current, completed and non-completed adult students. Considering that these students all share adult student status, this would be considered a purposeful sample.

Purposeful sampling includes various subtypes, with the most common being typical, unique, maximum variation, convenience and snowball. In brief, a unique sample refers to atypical or rare attributes; maximum variation refers to widely varying instances of a phenomenon; a convenience sample is based primarily on time, location, and availability of the sites or respondents; and snowball sampling is essentially locating a few participants and then asking them to refer others for the study (Merriam, 2009).

In the initial stages of identifying participants for this study, a typical sample was used in that anyone attending college between the ages of 40 and 65 would be considered. The age requirement can be seen as a criterion for the study population, an argument in support of LeCompte and Preissle as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 77) who prefer the term criterion-based selection to both purposive and purposeful. Once several potential participants were identified, *snowball sampling* (Patton, 2002) was used, in that after identifying several potential participants and other students who did not meet the criteria, I asked them to refer me to others who might participate. It is called snowball sampling because it is a process that allows the "snowball" of potential participants to grow.

As Merriam (2009) states, there is always the question of how many interviews to conduct, with the only viable answer being "an adequate number to answer the question posed at the beginning of the study" (p. 80). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest, the sampling is terminated when non new information is forthcoming, a status Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to as saturation; reaching a point where collecting additional data seems counterproductive (p. 136). Having no idea where that point might arrive I sought to identify 20 to 30 participants, whereas in fact I eventually identified 40 and interviewed 26 from among the volunteers.

The participants were selected primarily from two colleges, one in the Midwest (College A), and the other in the Pacific Midwest (College B). To provide an additional perspective, one participant was also solicited from a college on the east coast (College C). Colleges A and C are public institutions and College B is private. Colleges A and B, the main sources of participants have similar combinations of resident and transient populations, with both granting undergraduate and graduate degrees, and both offering a wide-variety of study programs. Colleges are referred to this way as part of the efforts to ensure participant privacy. Additional privacy measures include the use of pseudonyms rather than true names, and as needed minor edits to participant quotes.

 Potential participants for this study were identified through three primary initiatives: faculty referral of students and former students, student referral of other students and former students, and an electronic mailing list email sent to students via various faculty in the two colleges. Prior to deciding on the three initiatives I explored the possibility of getting lists of current, completed and non-completed students from area colleges but learned privacy concerns prevented such release of information. As a result I determined a combination of faculty and student referral, backed up by an electronic mailing list email requesting participants was the best course of action.

I contacted eight professors I knew or knew of at College A and three whom I had not met previously at College B. After explaining my study, I requested their assistance by contacting current, completed and non-completed students they knew of, to present my request for participants and ask those interested to contact me by telephone or email. I only sought the assistance of professors within the universities' colleges of education which as expected led to participants also coming from that area of study; a potential

limitation of this study discussed in Chapter Seven. In seeking student referrals, I

contacted several students I knew from previous encounters and asked their assistance in

identifying other current, completed or non-completed students who met the criteria for

this study. I also recruited four of those students to participate in the study.

Faculty and student' referrals at College A were aided by my familiarity with the

college and resulted in identifying 11 potential participants. Contact with those 11 led to

identifying 10 additional volunteers through snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). From the

21 identified, I interviewed 15, selecting those based upon factors including availability,

student status, level of study, and meeting study criteria with the goal of selecting the

most diverse sample population possible, and terminating interviews when I reached

saturation of the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Recruitment for participants from College B was less open due to my limited

prior exposure to the school, however, the staff was very supportive. I first sent an email

to the College of Education explaining my research and followed up with phone calls.

After finding the appropriate personnel I then visited the college in person. Faculty I

spoke with personally recruited a few students and also sent an electronic mailing list

email seeking volunteers. The email explained the purpose of the study, outlined the

expected time commitment as one or two, 1-hour interviews, and requested students' help

for the study. As with College A, students willing to participate were provided my

contact data and I then contacted them via telephone or email to arrange interviews.

These efforts resulted in identifying 19 potential participants, 11 of whom were

interviewed as part of this study. As with College A, participants were selected based

upon factors including availability, student status, level of study, and meeting study

criteria, with the goal of selecting the most diverse sample population possible, and

interviews were stopped when I reached saturation of the categories (Strauss & Corbin,

1998). The participant from College C was identified by peer referral.

        This research identified three groupings of adult students for interview: *current*

students, ones enrolled in classes at the time of interview; *completed students*, ones who

had completed their degrees within the past two years; and *non-completed students*, ones

who had made the voluntary decision to depart without completing the degree they were

seeking, with each offering potentially unique perspectives. Current students have the

most up-to-date perspectives on college experiences, completed students can offer the

perspective of having gone through the entire college experience and may have gained

some insight through hindsight, and non-completed students offer the perspective that

comes with making the unique decision to leave college without achieving their goals.

Participant Demographics

        In identifying the participants I requested they provide me with information on

their age (asking they identify an age range within groupings of: 40-44, 45-49, 50-54,

55-59, and 60-65), their gender, current student status as a current, completed or non-

completed student, and their level of study as an undergraduate, graduate certificate,

masters or doctoral student. I interviewed 26 participants, 25 of whom met the criteria

established of being between the ages of 40 and 65 years old, with at least two years of

successful college attendance and having returned after a significant gap in schooling.

One participant, Ray, did not meet the age criteria of 40 to 65 as he was just 35 when

attending classes, however, as Ray was the only participant who made a decision to

depart in the first semester of this program I decided to interview him despite the age discrepancy.

The demographics included at least four participants from each age group, 20 women and six men, with the level of study including 14 doctoral students, eight masters, one graduate certification, and three bachelors. The graduate certification programs are awarded for 15 hours of post-baccalaureate graduate study. Participants' time in their programs ranged from ones attending their first semester of classes since returning to college to students very close to graduation. The 16 current students included three who had completed all coursework and were considered *All But Dissertation* [ABD] students. Two of the completed students had recently finished their bachelors degrees and were back in school to pursue graduate certificates. And finally, two of the non-completed students were also ABD students, but no longer enrolled in college programs.

This study did not attempt to evaluate the role of any of the demographic factors on the data because the only category where there was a representative sample was age group, as gender and race/ethnicity did not provide representative samples. Key demographic data including participants' pseudonyms, student status, level of study, age group, and gender is included in Table 1. Participants in ABD status; ones who are completed students now enrolled in graduate certificate programs; and the participant enrolled in a second master's degree are noted by the addition of asterisks by their status.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Dissertation Name	Student Status	Study Level	Age Group	Gender
Karen	Current	Bachelors	60-65	F
Jenni	Current	Masters	40-44	F
Laura	Current	Masters	40-44	F
Michele	Current	Masters	40-44	F
Rayleen	Current	Masters	40-44	F
Shannon	Current	Masters	40-44	F
Angie	Current	Masters	60-65	F
Raylie	Current	Doctorate	45-49	F
Robin	Current	Doctorate	45-49	F
William	Current	Doctorate	45-49	M
Mike	Current	Doctorate	50-54	M
Linda	Current	Doctorate	55-59	F
Sienna	Current	Doctorate	55-59	F
Rick	Current*	Doctorate	50-54	M
Matt	Current*	Doctorate	55-59	M
Mia	Current*	Doctorate	60-65	F
Charla	Completed**	Grad Cert	55-59	F
Cissy	Completed**	Grad Cert	50-54	F
Justin	Completed	Grad Cert	55-59	M
Dee	Completed***	Masters	50-54	F
Elise	Completed	Masters	60-65	F
Ray	Non-Completed	Doctorate	35	M
Terry	Non-Completed	Doctorate	45-49	F
Kathy	Non-Completed	Doctorate	55-59	F
Barb	Non-Completed*	Doctorate	45-49	F
Becky	Non-Completed*	Doctorate	50-54	F

* ABD student   ** Recently completed bachelors   *** In 2nd masters

In grounded theory, *Open sampling* means "sampling those persons, places, situations that will provide the greatest opportunity to gather the most relevant data about the phenomenon under investigation" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 181), and was used to identify participants for this study. The phenomenon under investigation is the role adult students' perceptions of their college experiences play in their decisions on persistence. Therefore selecting adult students willing to share their perspectives on the topic, represents a potentially information-rich sample.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), data collection is guided by theoretical sampling in which the researcher jointly collects, codes and analyzes data, using that to decide what data to collect next and where to find them. As I purposefully chose the sites, persons and documents to be researched, this study meets that criteria. To ensure points of emphasis from earlier interviews were addressed in subsequent interviews, I frequently referred to previous participant statements and where appropriate, asked the current participant to comment on the issue. This practice meets Coyne's (1997) description of theoretical sampling as "the process of data collection whereby the researcher simultaneously collects, codes and analyzes the data in order to decide what data to collect next" (p. 625). It also supports Glaser's (1992) statement that the purpose of theoretical sampling is to "elicit codes from the raw data from the start of data collection through constant comparative analysis as the data pour in" (p. 102), then use the codes to direct further data collection.

This study also used Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method of analysis to seek patterns while grouping words or phrases as concepts, then eventually categories, allowing data collection and analysis to drive subsequent data collection, and

allowing interviews to influence subsequent data collection and analyses. The sample

population is clearly a purposeful one, however, as data was collected and analyzed,

theoretical sampling was used in guiding continuing data collection from the sample and

in potentially identifying other areas for data collection that might be related to college

experiences.

Human Subjects Approval

Identifying participants for this study while protecting their privacy required the

colleges' assistance, including approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for

Colleges A and B. This approval was not needed from College C as the participant had

completed her degree approximately two years ago and maintained no continuing ties to

the school.

Researcher Role

In this study, I am in a somewhat unique position as the researcher in that I meet

all the criteria of the study population. I am an adult student with my own college

experiences and personal interpretations of those events, as a result I was cautious to heed

the sage words of Cole and Knowles (2001) who state:

> When we embark on a research journey we take a lot with us. And even if we
>
> think we can 'pack lightly' and leave a substantial part of ourselves behind at
>
> home or at the office—our biases, social location, hunches, and so on—we
>
> cannot. What we can do, however, is know the contents of the baggage we carry
>
> and how it is likely to accompany us on the research journey from the beginning
>
> to the end. (p. 49)

To that end, I identified my status as an adult student to each participant and made clear

that while I had my own experiences, I was interested in hearing about theirs. There were

instances where participants spoke of experiences that were similar to some of my own,

and perhaps would have normally spurred a detailed response from me, but to the best of

my ability I kept my responses focused on supporting the participant to continue to tell

their story, rather than spending time on my own, and in trying to avoid influencing them

in any way.

Data Collection

Data collection involved the use of two focus group interviews and 19 one-on-one

interviews. The interview was selected as the primary mode of data collection because it

seemed the most logical to promote participant reflection. As Merriam (2009) says in

discussing the interview, sometimes it is "the only way to get the data" (p. 88). Just as

qualitative research was determined to be the best approach for this research, I support

that the interview is clearly the best means to collect data regarding the participants'

college experiences, and the only way to get at much of the data collected.

In conducting a pilot study, my partner and I examined three types of interviews

that vary according to the amount of structure in each, running from the highly structured

or standardized where the exact wording and order of questions is predetermined and the

interview is essentially an oral form of a survey, to the unstructured or informal interview

with open-ended questions that is much more like a conversation. In the pilot study we

both started with the type falling in the middle, the semi-structured interview which is a

mix of more and less structured interview questions, used flexibly, but with the majority

of the interview being guided by a list of issues to be explored (Merriam, 2009).

Interview type. After using the semi-structured type for the first pilot-study interview, I switched to a more informal and unstructured type, still lightly guiding the interview, but only to the extent necessary to occasionally return participants to the purpose of the interview and/or to ask them if there was anything they wished to comment on in an area they had not addressed. As Merriam (2009) states, totally unstructured interviews are rarely used as the sole means of collecting data, pointing out that in most studies the researcher can combine all three types of interviews. If I were to plot the interview type I used, it would fall about midway between the semi-structured and unstructured types, with movement one way or the other dependent upon the participant's level of interaction.

Philosophical approach. One of the biggest challenges I faced was in deciding which philosophical approach to take in the interviews, struggling between the *neo-positive* where researchers minimize their own bias through a neutral stance, and the *romantic* conceptions of interviewing where objectivity is not an issue and researchers try to generate an intimate and self-revealing conversation (Roulston, 2007, as cited in Merriam, 2009).

As with the pilot study, I decided that since it was clear I was also an adult student who naturally had my own experiences, I would use a mix between the neo-positive and the romantic approaches, but leaning much more toward staying neutral as with the neo-positive. My intent was to allow some personal response to participants' statements so the interview didn't seem clinical and unfeeling, but not to share too much for fear of influencing the interviews. In an attempt to make the participants feel more comfortable in sharing their stories, I included my status as an adult student in my introduction and in

the invitation to share that I paraphrased to begin the interviews. I consciously used self-reflection throughout the interviews to ensure I did not let any personal biases influence how I asked questions or interpreted responses. I also frequently checked for accuracy in my understanding of participants' statements.

Use of digital recorder. All interviews were recorded using a small digital voice recorder and then copied to my computer for transcribing. After recording the first few interviews, I decided to buy a second recorder to serve as a backup, actually recording the remaining interviews simultaneously on both recorders. As the original recorder performed flawlessly (and I remembered to turn it on each time), I transferred just one copy. Once a copy was secured on the computer, I immediately made three additional copies, keeping one on a backup hard drive, one on a thumb drive, and one on my laptop computer. I then copied the original file to the transcribing software.

General Interview Strategies

In preparing for the interviews I reviewed Patton's (2002) comments on the six types of questions: (a) experience and behavior, (b) opinion and values, (c) feeling, (d) knowledge, (e) sensory, and (f) background/demographic. I used all but the knowledge questions extensively in the interviews, and used knowledge questions a bit in exploring participants knowledge of support services available on campus. Patton offers sage advice in recommending to avoid the "why" questions, so in spite of the fact that one of the roles of subcategories is to provide the "why" in regard to categories, I worked toward understanding those answers without asking why. I did, however, ask several "what if" and "would you" type questions to get participants to think about their experiences in different ways; for instance, asking one participant who had described a

teaching style she was especially uncomfortable with, "what if other classes had been like

that?" and with non-completed participants, I asked, "Would you have still have left if…"

or "Would you return if…?" These are but a few examples from the data collection.

In collecting the data, I sought to hear about every participant's experiences with

the college as an adult student. I began by providing a brief overview of the study and

explaining that I too was a returning adult student with my own experiences but that I

was interested in hearing about theirs. I provided five major areas intended to represent

the broad spectrum of college experiences: business processes, support services,

classroom environment, student/advisor interactions and feelings of fit, and explained

they could discuss their experiences in those or any other area.

To ensure I provided all participants with a consistent message about this study, I

prepared a written statement (Appendix D) that I used to guide my opening comments

that I refer to as my invitation to share. The statement summarizes the intent of the

research, highlights the purpose of the interview, and asks participants to openly share

their experiences. I also introduced the five main areas of potential interaction involving

college experiences as: business processes, support services, student/advisor interaction,

classroom environment, and feelings of fit, providing a short example of each. I stressed

these were by no means the only areas where college experiences could occur but were

meant solely to help participants in thinking about their own experiences.

I used the statement in all interviews, and while I did not read the text verbatim, I

ensured I covered all of its points in each interview. My intent was to clarify the

research, relax participants, and get them thinking about their experiences so data could

be collected on how experiences may have influenced their decision processes regarding

remaining in or leaving school. In closing the invitation to share I explained that since I

had covered a lot, I would provide note cards with the main headings listed.

        In an attempt to remove any significance from the order that I introduced the five

main areas, and to facilitate my noting of the order the participants addressed the topics,

right after covering the introductory information I placed five 3x5 cards with the words:

Business Processes; Support Services; Classroom Environment; Student/ Advisor

Interaction; and *Feelings of Fit,* along with a sixth card with the word *Miscellaneous* on

the table. I explained the cards were to help participants remember key points of the

question and that the topics could be taken in any order. I had practiced using the cards

in the pilot study and found participants initially answered the questions in the order the

cards were randomly stacked, but then referred back to them several times in moving

back and forth between topics.

        The invitation to share regarding the research topic was used to create an open

atmosphere to learn about what mattered most to the participants. In the pilot study one

participant was not saying much until I asked her to think about the classes she had taken

and talk about characteristics of classes she especially liked or disliked.   This prompted

her to share more, so I added the question in all interviews where participants did not

automatically volunteer that information.

Focus Group Interviews

        Focus groups were selected as a means of data collection for two primary reasons,

to use the group to generate data, and to provide a means of comparing the two main

colleges used in this study to check for similarities or differences. Patton (2002) points

out that one of the differences between focus group and one-on-one interviews is that

participants get to hear what the others in the group say, enabling them to comment on others' responses. Purposeful sampling was used for both focus groups and the one-on-one interviews to ensure participants had knowledge of the topic.

Merriam (2009) points out that there are no hard and fast rules for how many people to include in a focus group but said most writers suggest six to ten. My advisor recommended not going above five based upon her experience with the challenge of being able to hear all participants (E.P. Isaac-Savage, personal communication, November, 2010). Berg (2007) calls focus group interviews a method well suited to obtain general background information about a topic of interest, and as Krueger and Casey (2009) explain, focus groups are best used when researchers are trying to identify a range of thoughts about a particular topic, which was a key goal of their use in this study, especially in light of the very limited research on adult student persistence.

As Macnaghten and Myers (2004, as cited in Merriam, 2009) state "focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives—but don't" (p. 65), and that is very much in line with the topic for this study. As Merriam (2009) points out, a focus group is a poor choice for topics that are sensitive or very personal, a point that I considered in selecting the participants for both, ensuring that I invited only continuing or completed students as I was unsure how a non-completed student might feel about the public sharing. For both focus group interviews I served as the group facilitator, introducing myself, meeting the participants, sharing a quick overview of the purpose of my research, then paraphrasing the written document I call the invitation to share. Once the participants started talking I primarily limited my

engagement to offering supportive short responses, taking a few notes (relying more on the recording) and when needed, helping steer the conversation back to the topic.

In the sense of offering supportive short responses, I found that early on in both interviews I needed to ask participants to provide more details, but I tried to do so in line with just showing interest rather than stopping conversation to assume the role of the interviewer. I found the best method was to either merely reply with a questioning sounding comment such as, "really?" and then wait for the person to respond with more details, or to ask someone else in the group or sometimes the whole group what they thought about the last comment or experience.

For the most part, participants fed upon each other's comments, making my biggest challenge being the need to try to keep straight in my mind who said what so I could refer back to it during the interview. At the outset I asked the participants to say their name when speaking so in reviewing the audio tape I would be certain who said what, but once they did this a few times I called off the practice as I was confident I would be able to make the recognition needed and it was interrupting the flow of conversation. During the first focus group interview at College A (Focus Group A), one of the participants commented on her view that instructors should be responsible for ensuring quieter students do not get monopolized by more verbal ones. I took this also as a clue that I needed to ensure each person in the group was heard. This responsibility would be especially challenging if the group exceeded the five participants of Focus Group A, so I recommend limiting the number of participants to five if practical.

The first focus group interview was of Focus Group A (at College A), with students contacted through my personal recruitment of two of them, and faculty and

student referrals for the other three. I contacted all students by email providing

additional details on the study and asking for the basic demographic data identified

earlier. That data was used to select a diverse group for the December 2010 interview.

The participants were: Rick, Sienna, Matt, Mia and Raylie, with four of the five knowing

each other at least informally from earlier classes or other on campus interactions. The

interview was conducted in a small, quiet, and private conference room on campus. The

room and oblong table provided a comfortable setting for easy sharing of ideas.

I conducted the Focus Group B (from College B) interview in Feb 2011, inviting

six students with four being available to attend. The participants were: Justin, Rayleen,

Shannon, and Michele, with none of them knowing each other prior to this meeting. This

interview was also held in an on campus conference room but the table was rather large

and was round so I was concerned it would make sharing difficult, however, the

participants just automatically all joined me on one side of the table which provided a

more intimate setting.

The details of the information shared in the focus group interviews is provided in

appropriate sections throughout this study with quotes being attributed to the participants

by name and line number from the transcript. In both focus group interviews I used the

3x5 cards but since there was more space between the participants and me, I place the

cards in a central point on the table in a random and somewhat disorganized fashion to

require participants to have to touch them to see the words.

One-on-One Interviews

As Merriam (2009) points out in discussing the interviewer and respondent

interaction, the skill of the interviewer plays a large role in bringing about positive

interaction, and as she states, "being respectful, nonjudgmental, and non-threatening is a beginning" (107). I was comfortable entering into these interviews as although I had limited experience with focus groups, having used them only a few times in the past, I had conducted dozens of one-on-one, or person-to-person interviews as Merriam (2009) refers to them. In the spirit of full disclosure, most of my previous interviews were in the role of a criminal investigator rather than researcher. While the two roles may seem completely different, my experience suggests they are not all that dissimilar, as even in my investigator role, being respectful, nonjudgmental and nonthreatening was essential to successful interviews.

I was also already familiar with the importance of establishing rapport, asking good questions, and the importance of what Patton (2002) calls the purpose of interviewing; to enter into the other person's perspective. I will not belabor the point, but merely state that most interviews that lead to confessions in criminal investigative work result from the interviewer successfully representing the other person's perspective.

I conducted the one-on-one interviews between December 2010 through April 2011 for College A participants, and February 2011 through April 2011 for College B participants. The lone College C participant was interviewed in March 2011. My intent was for each interview to be conducted in a setting that provided for uninterrupted discussion and open sharing, with the majority being held in small conference rooms on the college campuses. There were some exceptions with one interview being conducted at an outdoor table next to a campus building where occasional pauses were necessary to allow planes to pass overhead; one at an off-campus coffee shop where the participant was very comfortable due to her frequent use of the location for studying and relaxation.

Four interviews could not be conducted in person due to an inability to arrange schedules

to meet; a complication of the distance between myself and the participants. Three of

these interviews were conducted via telephone and one via computer, but each was

recorded just as the in-person interviews were. In spite of the complications, all

participants seemed comfortable and provided important data for this study.

      For all interviews I completed a verbatim transcription, conducting no more than

four interviews before transcribing them for initial analysis, and as much as practical,

conducting and transcribing only one interview before beginning the next. This very

arduous task likely took longer than it would have to just type the interview, however, I

preferred this method because listening to the interview and actually speaking each word

while reading the resulting text to ensure accuracy brought every aspect of the interview

to the present again. Additionally, manually inserting the um's, oh's, and word repetition

that accompanies normal speech, and noting the long pauses, also added emphasis that

might otherwise have been overlooked. My wife helped by transcribing six of the

interviews, but she left the insertion of verbal and nonverbal cues to me which I added by

listening to each recording while reviewing the transcript word by word.

      After transcribing individual or small groups of interviews, I sat down with

individual transcripts and formally began open coding, described by Strauss and Corbin

(1998) as "the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties

and dimensions are discovered in the data" (p. 101). This is done by breaking the data

into discrete parts for close examination and comparison for similarities and differences

between the interviews. I say "formally began open coding" because as is natural even

when hearing the stories for the first time, I could not help but note some obviously

central ideas shared by the participants as they spoke. To facilitate the formal process, I

formatted every transcript as a double spaced document with continuous line numbering

and a text box along the right margin where I captured concepts and made simple memos

during the initial analysis.

For both focus group interviews and most one-on-one interviews I provided

snacks and water for the participants and in each instance I spent a few minutes

introducing myself and getting to know a bit about the participants before beginning with

the official introduction that I call an invitation to share. Also, I gave all participants a

five dollar gift card to a sandwich shop to thank them for their time.

Data Analysis

This study used grounded theory's data analysis methods which are very precise

in their demands to ensure accurate and reliable analysis. Corbin and Strauss (1990)

provide very specific canons and procedures that guide researchers' use of grounded

theory. Their straight forward reason is to avoid researchers' claims to have used

grounded theory "when they have used only some of its procedures or have used them

incorrectly" (p. 6). They go on to say that researchers "must tread a fine line between

satisfying the suggested criteria and allowing procedural flexibility in the face of the

inevitable contingencies of an actual research project" (p. 6). They add that following the

procedures with care gives a project rigor, and that is my goal.

Grounded Theory Canons and Procedures

Corbin and Strauss offer these eleven canons an procedures that guide my data

analysis throughout this study.

1) *Data collection and analyses are interrelated processes.* In simple terms this refers to the requirement that analysis begins as soon as the first bit of data is collected. This is so important to grounded theory research because the analysis is used to direct the next interview, however as Corbin and Strauss (1990) point out, that does not mean the interviews are not standardized, as the use of an introduction and invitation to share as I use is in line with these procedures, but they require that I include data gained from early collection in future data collection and analysis. As they state, "this process is a major source of the effectiveness of the grounded theory approach" (p. 6) and it requires that every concept brought into the study be first considered as provisional, earning its way into the theory by repeatedly being present in the interviews.

2) *Concepts are the basic units of Analysis.* This is a reminder that researchers work with conceptualizations of the data, not the actual data. My job is to look at the incidents, events and happenings and analyze them as indicators of phenomena, and that is when I assign conceptual labels. For instance, comments regarding instructors getting to know the students more personally, asking about students' other classes, telling students to call or email at any time with questions, might all be conceptualized under the term "caring." As Corbin and Strauss (1990) point out, it is only through the comparing of incidents and naming like phenomena under a common term that data can be accumulated.

3) *Categories must be developed and related.* This refers to the need to grouping concepts that relate to the same phenomenon to form categories that are more abstract than the concepts they represent. Here Corbin and Strauss (1990) stress that must be developed in terms of the properties and dimensions it represents, as that specification is

how categories are defined and given explanatory power. This is what allows categories

to be related to each other and form theory.

4) *Sampling in grounded theory proceeds on theoretical grounds.* This relates to

my selection of current, completed and non-completed adult students for this study. My

selection was to allow my study of phenomena surrounding their college experiences,

however, once began, I did not sample the students but rather their incidents, events and

happenings related to their experiences. It is then my responsibility to note indications of

important concepts in every interview and carry it into the next interview.

5) *Analysis makes use of constant comparisons.* I addressed this before, but a key

point Corbin and Strauss (1990) make in outlining the canons and procedures is that in

addition to comparisons helping guard against bias, they also help achieve precision and

consistency.

6) *Patterns and variations must be accounted for.* Simply put, the data must be

examined for regularity or when regularity is not present, to understand why it is not.

7) *Process must be built into the theory.* The can refer to the process of breaking

a phenomenon down into stages or steps, or noting the process of actions/interactions that

have a role in the phenomenon. The key is for researchers to identify how process

influences the phenomenon.

8) *Writing theoretical memos is an integral part of doing grounded theory.* Here

Corbin and Strauss (1990) stress that memos are not merely ideas, as they serve as a

means to help researchers in the formulation and revision of theory during the research

process. I consider memos the only means to avoid losing critical data.

9) *Hypotheses about relationships among categories should be developed and verified as much as possible during the research process.* As Corbin and Strauss (1990) state, "a key feature of grounded theory is that hypotheses are constantly revised during the research until they hold true for all of the evidence" (p. 11).

10) *A grounded theorist need not work alone.* This simply refers to the benefits of testing concepts and their relationships with colleagues. I practice this both through my reaching out to fellow doctoral students to review my work, and through the in-depth engagement of my methodology advisor.

11) *Broader structural conditions must be analyzed, however microscopic the research.* This challenging statement stresses that researchers must look at broader conditions that might affect the phenomenon of central interest.

Analyzing the data. Analysis began with the focus group interview at College A, followed by three one-on-one interviews with College A participants. Time constraints precluded transcribing between these first four interviews, however, I began analysis immediately after each interview by reviewing my notes and listening to the audio recording looking for words or phrases that might indicate a moment of meaning, thereby beginning the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This information was also compared to the other participants' comments during their interviews.

This near immediate analysis provided insight for the next interview, followed by more analysis, more interviews, and so on. This constant interplay between researcher and research provides the concepts, categories and eventual theoretical knowledge that can lead to discovery of theory behind the action. Corbin and Strauss (1990) explain the aim of data analysis in grounded theory is to "ultimately build a theoretical explanation

by specifying phenomena in terms of conditions that give rise to them, how they are expressed through action/interaction, the consequences that result from them, and variations of these qualifiers" (p. 9).

After each interview I made memos on important concepts I noted and addressed how I thought those concepts could or should influence the next interview, as well as noting my thoughts on groupings of the concepts. As soon as possible after conducting interviews, I transcribed the voice recordings using a speech to text program and using double spaced type and line numbering to enable referencing back to specific points during analysis. To assist analysis, transcriptions were edited to illustrate emphasis, volume, rate change, and the like, as well as to show points where the recordings are inaudible or other sounds potentially impact the interview.

In grounded theory's open coding, researchers are concerned with identifying central ideas in the data that are represented as *concepts*. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain, once the text is opened and concepts are being identified, researchers can begin grouping concepts into categories which makes it easier to remember, think about, and develop the ideas in terms of their *properties* and *dimensions*. To that end, for the first several transcriptions I used microanalysis which is looking at every word to expose the participants' ideas and thoughts, and the meanings they made of them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using this very precise technique in open coding, I noted words or short comments the participants made or that represented a point they were making, and as Strauss and Corbin suggest, answering the question "What is going on here?" (p. 114).

I quickly discovered that as expected in grounded theory, concepts began to emerge and ideas began to form on what was important in the data. I noted these

developments in the text box for subsequent review and analysis, a practice often called

memoing, which is a very important step in analyzing the data, as it provided an ongoing

dialogue about emerging theory (Charmaz, 1994).   This beginning development of

potential categories led me to transition to more of a line-by-line or phrase-by-phrase

analysis while remaining alert for the possibility that even single words could suggest a

new concept. As I continued, I looked to find patterns and variations in the data for

comparison with data from other interviews to see if there was matching or perhaps

evidence of another pattern; a comparison integral to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin,

1998).

I used memoing throughout the research process from data collection, to data

analysis and even into the writing of the dissertation, as it provided an avenue for me to

explain my emerging ideas about the data, and as Creswell (2008) recommends, I used it

to record and explore hunches, ideas and thoughts that were later examined to discover

the broader explanations at work in the process. I also used memoing to record my

thoughts on issues I was unfamiliar with, such as when some participants mentioned

dislike for certain type desks in some of the classrooms. This reminded me to explore

that area and is an example of theoretical sampling where the emerging data drove

collection. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) assert, without memoing, it is impossible for

the researcher to reconstruct the details of the research. I had personally experienced the

benefit of its use when conducting the pilot study (Gaither & Locke, 2009) and used it

extensively during this study.

It soon became clear as Merriam (1998) asserts, that to make sense of the data I

would have to consolidate, reduce and interpret the data collected. To that end, as I

continued analyzing the transcripts and more concepts were noted, I followed Strauss and

Corbin's (1998) direction, purposefully moving to the use of more abstract explanatory

terms, called categories. In early analysis I likely spent too much time trying to find just

the right word, but with each successive transcript this became easier. Perhaps

needlessly, and definitely at great expense of time, I continued recording all seemingly

significant concepts the participants used in the text box, but opened a new document to

record the potential categories.

This move to noting categories was important as it helped reduce the growing

number of concepts that would have soon become unmanageable, and more importantly,

helped me begin to develop them in terms of their properties and dimensions (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). After coding each interview I then reviewed the data in the text box only

for each, copying the noted concepts onto one document titled, "analysis coding" and all

the memos onto another titled, "memos and audit trail." These documents were updated

following the analysis of each interview. As the interviews and analysis progressed, I

would recognize new and more appropriate titles for the categories and could more easily

determine what concepts would evolve into categories, subcategories or properties, but at

this stage I included all of them on the potential category document.

Some excerpts from one memo I made regarding my progression in coding over

the time I was conducting interviews helps illustrate my own progression as a researcher:

As I progressed in the open coding, it became easier to recognize participants'

moments of meaning, in part because they sometimes used similar words and

because for most, their pace, pitch, and/or volume would change, not necessarily

always getting fast, higher or louder, in fact, sometimes just the opposite, but they

seldom went from a seemingly mundane point to one that mattered to them without some change. As my experience and knowledge of the sort of things being offered grew, I moved to thinking more about how the individual words or phrases might compare or contrast to other words or phrases the participant or previous participants had said. I also reflected on how their comments related to the literature.

In following grounded theory, I consciously began to think about the concepts being revealed and how they could be grouped under more abstract categories. That said, I committed to reviewing every transcript fully the first time through, noting on the transcript itself the various concepts. This may have been overkill, as I definitely began axial coding as I moved along in that in addition to noting potential categories emerging, I began to make memos exploring whether the point was a category or sub-category, and asking if the moments of meaning being noted were more accurately properties or dimensions.

As I needed to go through every word of every transcript to ensure its accuracy, I stuck to the line-by-line analysis the first time through, however, I started adding memos by the fifth transcript that documented my emerging thoughts on categories.   Some of these memos I entered right into the text box and others I entered onto a separate memo document I kept open when analyzing the transcripts.

 According to Corbin and Strauss (1990) in axial coding, categories are related to their subcategories forming more precise and complete explanations about phenomena, with subcategories responding to questions about categories such as when, why, who,

how and with what consequences. In examining these relationships I was also employing

the process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) taking even basic concepts

and comparing them against other concepts for similarities or differences. This practice

of comparing not just codes to codes, but also concepts to concepts, categories to

categories, and the iterations possible between those was enlightening in that it helped me

see things I otherwise might have missed.

Just as Corbin and Strauss (1990) assert, constant comparisons help guard against

bias. I was deliberately trying to keep my own experiences out of the analysis, but as is

expected, some concepts noted were ones I related closely to, so without comparisons

across interviews, across categories and subcategories and other levels, I could have

inadvertently assigned greater significance to given incidents or events. I see constant

comparisons as accomplishing at least two valuable tasks, one, as just described, it serves

as a sort of checks and balance against assigning undue significance to pieces of the data,

and secondly it guards against potentially overlooking data. As a researcher I might not

notice the importance someone places on some one event, but if a similar event surfaces

in other data, it should then be noticed.

The developing analysis enabled me to ask better follow-up questions in the later

interviews, however, I stuck with my initial plan of beginning each interview with the

same opening statement that invited the participant to tell about their experiences, and

then within the interview, asking for more details related to the similarities and

differences with previous interviews. After completing all interviews I had two summary

documents, a multi-page listing of all concepts recorded under the participants' names

(Appendix A) and a document with 95 identified potential categories (Appendix B),

compiled from all interviews. Prior to further analysis I verified all concepts from the
interviews were reflected on the list of potential categories by painstakingly reviewing
each interview once more and cross-referencing the noted concepts there with the
document.

During my first few interviews, including College A's focus group interview,
participants had made clear that some of the experiences that mattered to them was
having engaged and talented instructors who provided current and useful knowledge, and
that they expected a lot of themselves and their peers. Key concepts noted from these
interviews included terms like *instructor talent, instructor engagement, focus on
learning, higher expectations, fit with professor, challenging classes, respect, class
management, teaching style, frustration, rigor, standards, value, time challenges,* and
appreciation. As expected, these concepts were already presenting potential categories,
however I wanted to collect more data before more formally grouping them as categories.
I had, however, begun to record concepts that seemed to fit the criteria of a category in all
capitals on the document I was using to record all concepts (I recorded concepts on the
actual transcriptions and on a separate document for easier reference).

I use Terry's and Elise's interviews as examples to illustrate the process. I began
Terry's interview as I did all others, providing an overview of the research which
included the five main areas of college experiences for them to consider: Business
Processes, Support Services, Classroom Environment, Student/Advisor Interactions, and
Feelings of Fit, and told her that any other area she might think of to address college
experiences was welcome as well. As this was a face-to-face interview I placed five 3x5
inch cards on the table in front of her, each one having one of the areas listed on the card,

plus a sixth card with the word "Miscellaneous" to represent the "any other area" that I spoke of. As stated in Chapter Three, the intent was to evaluate whether or not participants put emphasis on any one or more area, so I placed the cards on the table somewhat haphazardly so she would have to move them to see the words. For telephonic interviews or the one electronic interview, I merely repeated the areas. Terry, as with the others seemed to use the cards solely to remember the areas, but did not seem to place emphasis in any one area. In retrospect I think that was a good practice as too much emphasis on the specific areas, versus experiences in general might have distracted the participants from getting into the level of details they did.

Based upon previous data collection and analysis, I was aware of potential categories as I began and used that information to ensure I sought sufficient detail in Terry's interview. Terry was clearly a passionate person, often veering a bit off topic to describe the delight she receives in being the best teacher she can be, and in describing some of the truly remarkable progress she has made in teaching students. The passion with which she told of her college experiences, coupled with the stories from her teaching experiences made for a very interesting interview, one in which I was glad to have the digital recorder, as when she got excited about a subject, Terry would speak very fast and with great emotion so I did not want to miss anything she was willing to share.

After completing the interview I transcribed it verbatim, adding editing marks to show emphasis such as rate and volume change, posture and facial expression changes, pauses, or other indications of a change in presentation. As I transcribed I also added memos within the text to note thoughts I had on some aspect of the interview or my overall thinking on the analysis. After transcribing the interview, I formatted the

document to have the narrative double-spaced with continuous line numbering and adding a text box along the right border.

Using microanalysis which is the careful examination of the data, I listened for any moments of meaning that Terry might reveal related to her college experiences, and when hearing those, I noted them as concepts in the text box. As this was my sixth one-on-one interview, I had moved from the original word-by-word and phrase-by-phrase technique to more of a scanning for interesting and relevant data, but I was still listening closely. Occasionally as a concept made me think of something from existing data I would either pause to review the other data, looking for similarities or differences in their relating of the information, or document my curiosity in a memo for later. If I had a short memo to add, I would put that into the text box, otherwise I added it to a document I created and kept open during every interview that I titled, Memos and Audit Trail. I continued this process through the entire interview, as I did for all interviews.

The following list provides the concepts noted during open coding of Terry's interview. Terms in all capitals represent concepts believed to have the most potential as categories. Parenthetical comments were used to illustrate points or explain a concept. This list includes short phrases, whereas in later reductions I tried to reduce concepts to one or two words, using memos to remind myself if there was anything unique that the shorter title could not convey. It can be argued that not every code listed is clearly a concept, however, the intent was to default on the side of ensuring nothing was missed. This was easier in later interviews due to more familiarity with potential responses. During coding I also made memos on my thoughts and in subsequent analysis, I added additional memos and summarized critical parts of her interview.

Concepts from Terry's interview.

- different approach than others	- FRUSTRATION	- shocked
- shocked at lack of fit	- Supported by peers	- BUSINESS PRCSS
- very theoretical	- FEELINGS OF FIT	- CLASSROOM
- going through hoops	- (unnerved by title seekers)	ENVIRONMENT
- not tied to goals	- SACRIFICE	- love open dialogue
- energy vs. result	- worry about price you pay	- lectures are brutally
- RETURN ON INVESTMENT	- energy expenditure	awful
- Don't need PhD	- Misuse of valuable time	- COST VS REWARD
- COMPETING PRIORITIES	- VALUE	- FIT (felt stupid)
- MISMATCHED GOALS	- loves collegiality	- Person, not Number
- Loved seminar, not others	- disappointed in some peers	- RESPECT
- VALUE OF TIME	- questioned authenticity	- see me as a
- Requirements hurt teaching	- challenge to core values	competent learner
- incomplete without doctorate	- unwilling to change	- see me as a confident
- mindset change needed	- selfish sacrifices	individual
- Encouraged to apply to prgm	- EXPECTATIONS	- loved the sharing
- Prgm sounded awesome	- FALSE PROMISES	- ADVISOR ROLE
- no awareness of student svcs	- Boulder on the path	

To ensure Terry's privacy I cannot reveal all the information I made memos on, but the following memo is a brief sample, with more references to her comments discussed later in this study.

Memo: 4-19: In this lengthy and thoughtful interview, Terry quickly expressed her shock that the doctoral program was not a better fit for her; as she put it, "Why does this not make my heart sing?" (86-87). As she tried to explain it (perhaps to herself as well as me), she said she was spending too much energy on things not tied to her goal (being a better teacher), and right away pointed out the biggest energy drain of all, a statistics course, adding, "I was spending all weekend on statistics!" (100-101).

Memo: 4-19: FRUSTRATION: COMPETING PRIORITIES: When she started getting most frustrated with the time she was spending on the classes, time that was taking her from her goal of being a better teacher, and from preparing for classes at school, she said she asked herself "Do I need a PhD (long pause) to be the kind of teacher I want to be?" (152-153), and decided that she did not. It's interesting that she made that decision based on the question of need to teach, and she paused a long time between just asking did she need a PhD and adding to be the kind of teacher she wanted to be. Perhaps she was asking herself the first part of the question from several angles, and perhaps in some areas the answer was "yes," but of course that is speculation on my part. Some may argue that my interest in this is outside the scope of the study, but to even attempt to understand why some students persist and others do not, I try to understand all that I can. Terry went on to explain, "A lot of people in my family have their doctorate, so I sort of had in my head for a while, if you don't have your doctorate you're kind of incomplete" (160-162).

These memos illustrate my capturing of data from Terry's interview that support

several concepts, including *frustration, competing priorities, need, return on investment,*

value of time, sacrifice, shock, expectation and many others. In an illustration of just how

powerful just a few words can be, I found *frustration, value of time,* and *expectation* as

all being included in one short sentence, "I was spending all weekend on statistics" (100-

101), a fitting illustration of the challenge of effective coding.

With the review of Terry's interview demonstrating the steps used to identify

concepts, which are abstract representations of the events, objects, actions or interactions

that were significant in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I use the interview with Elise

to show additional coding. To help the concepts reveal what was really going on, I

moved to identifying the characteristics or attributes (properties) of the concepts.

Looking at another participants' case, Elise expressed her frustration in an algebra

class which she described as a nightmare. When asked to explain what made it so, she

said, "I just never felt like he understood what I was trying to explain to him, how I just

didn't get it" (704-705). In open coding I noted, "frustration, just didn't get it" in the text

box, later listing just *frustration* as the concept and making a memo about Elise feeling

frustrated because she wasn't able to communicate effectively with the professor.

Writing this memo helped me realize that the interaction, in addition to being represented

as frustration, also included another concept, *poor communication*.

Although Elise was clearly frustrated at the experience, I did not elevate the

concept to a category at that time as more data analysis was needed. My caution in

naming frustration as a category is reinforced by Strauss and Corbin's (1998) reminder

that "concepts that reach the status of a category are abstractions; they represent not one

individual's or group's story but rather the stories of many persons or groups reduced into, and represented by, several highly conceptual terms" (p. 145). In other words, Elise's story alone certainly identifies *frustration* and *poor communication* as concepts, but it does not lift either to the status of a category. I did, however, list frustration as a potential category to ensure that it was captured for further consideration.

I used open coding to identify concepts, and potential categories, while simultaneously using axial coding to begin relating the categories identified to their subcategories. Taking Elise's example again, I saw both frustration and poor communication as likely categories as they describe problems, issues or events. Additionally, both could have student/professor interaction as subcategories as they answer at least the who regarding the frustration and poor communication.

Using Elise's short statement again offers a good illustration of what Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to as analysis occurring at two levels in analyzing the data: a) the actual words participants use, and b) researcher's conceptualization of those words. In telling how her instructor never understood what she was trying to explain, she never said she was frustrated, nor did she label the problem as poor communication, instead those terms were my conceptualization of her words and emotion.

In coding axially, researchers relate properties at a dimensional level. Elise's frustration with not being able to communicate effectively with her professor could range from mild discomfort to high anxiety. Communication, as a property can have a dimensional range from no understanding to full understanding, and in fact, all properties can have multiple dimensions. Communication can include dimensions of comprehension, frequency, level of sharing, and the like. In fact the breadth of

dimensions can help uncover the relationships among categories that is so important to

continuing analysis. This is accomplished by relating structure, which are the

circumstances in which problems, issues, or events related to the phenomenon are

situated or arise, with process, which is the action/interaction over time in response to the

problems and issues (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

　　　　As Strauss and Corbin (1998) point out, participants sometimes make the linkage

clear by using words like: "since," " because of," " when," and "due to" for example, but

other times it is not so obvious. Elise actually said because, but it was a few lines before

she raised her point about not being able to make her professor understand her difficulty

so I almost missed it.

> Well since I told you all the good stuff, my algebra class was a nightmare,
>
> *because* [emphasis added] the gentleman that was teaching the class, a really
>
> young guy, he was a TA, and I don't think that he could, I just had such anxiety
>
> about taking the class, and as often as I was going to him to ask for help, I just
>
> never felt like he understood what I was trying to explain to him, how I just didn't
>
> get it. (700-705)

In the words leading up to her expressed frustration, Elise named two of the

factors involved in her frustration, a) the teacher was really young, and b) she had anxiety

about the class. By reviewing just a few lines before her expressed frustration, I was able

to see Elise's frustration over the poor communication with her professor more clearly,

but these relationships are not always so clear and linkages among categories can be very

subtle, a fact that supports the need to look not just at categories, but also at their

subcategories, properties and dimensions in explaining phenomena.

Throughout my analysis I attempted to follow Strauss and Corbin's (1998) recommendations regarding axial coding by relating the categories to the subcategories, but early on it was difficult so I was glad to read their statement that "early in the analysis, the researcher might not know which concepts are categories and which are subcategories" (p. 125) as that was precisely my struggle.   I began reducing the concepts list first by merely identifying obvious variations of the same term such as *available* and *availability*, an effort that reduced the 95 concepts to 77; still too many but a start. At this point I returned to the literature for help, finding Merriam's (2009) statement that "Category construction is data analysis" (p. 178). This simple statement actually speaks volumes on the process of creating categories, as category construction is indeed the heart of data analysis.

Merriam's (2009) criteria for devising categories. Merriam offers very helpful criteria to be used in devising categories, making clear that all categories should be:

- responsive to the purpose of the research; that is they are answers to the research questions.

- exhaustive; researchers should be able to place all data deemed important into a category or subcategory.

- mutually exclusive, in that a unit of data should fit into only one category.

- sensitizing; meaning the name of the category should provide readers with some sense of their nature.

- conceptually congruent; meaning that all categories should have the same level of abstraction.

After coding and initial administrative reduction of the concepts, I was left with 77 concepts, several of which I had noted as most likely categories, a notation I made either through memos on the concept during analysis, or by recording the concept in capital letters on the "potential categories" document. In a relatively simple application of Merriam's criteria I was able to reduce the 77 potential category headings to 24.

Guba and Lincoln's (1981) guidelines for developing categories. Adding to Merriam's (2009) criteria for devising categories, Guba and Lincoln offer four guidelines for use in developing categories, these are: (a) the number of people mentioning and the frequency of its being mentioned indicates an important dimension, (b) some categories will appear more or less credible to the audience, (c) some categories will stand out because of their uniqueness, and (d) certain categories may reveal areas of inquiry not otherwise recognized. Combining the advice of Merriam (2009), Guba and Lincoln, and Strauss and Corbin (1998) I was able to further reduce the list of most viable candidates to five: Relationships, Expectations, Fit, Value and Challenges, with Expectations and Fit both being in vivo codes, and all of them representing phenomenon commonly cited by the participants.

Despite believing these five categories accurately represented the data, I wanted to test their viability and did so using a process recommended by my research professor, of viewing the categories as "buckets" and checking to see if other concepts fit within them (W. Althof, personal communication, November 2, 2009). Although I was keeping Merriam's (2009) criteria in mind throughout my analysis, I intentionally did not adhere to one criteria, that being the requirement that all categories be exclusive, for instance

when sorting concepts into the buckets I allowed some to be counted in more than one

bucket. Again, this was by design with the intent to resolve the issue in further analysis.

After sorting, I used a spread sheet to record the categories and then placed the

remaining concepts into as many of the categories as it seemed to easily fit at that time.

Once this exercise was complete, I reviewed the final spread sheet, then set the data aside

to provide more mental space. The next day I again reviewed the spread sheet and then

in relating the categories to their subcategories, verifying their properties, and identifying

their dimensions, I decided to take the full list of 77 and print them on sheets of paper

then cut them into small strips with each containing a single term. I laid these strips

randomly on a large table and began looking to group them by common characteristics.

Naturally I was cognizant of the five categories I had narrowed the list to earlier,

but as I progressed I tried to set those aside and merely look at each slip of paper as its

own narrative on the data. I began by selecting slips that obviously shared common

aspects, such as the slips competing commitments, competing priorities and conflicting

responsibilities.   As I moved the slips into separate areas of the table I noted that a few

concepts seemed to fit in two groups but none seemed to demand placement in more than

two. Looking systematically at the slips and asking whether it represented a relating the

categories at the dimensional level, a process that provided significantly more clarity and

allowed me to look at each slip of paper and ask if it was truly a category, a subcategory

or a property. Once I had all slips grouped, I stepped away from the data temporarily to

provide a potentially different perspective upon returning to the analysis.

This process continued on and off over a couple of days and during the exercise I

removed three slips from the group due to their clear redundancy to other terms. It was

only when I was satisfied the groupings were indeed appropriate, at least to the point to

move forward with the analysis to begin integration of the categories, that it struck me

that this grouping had resulted in only four categories, Importance of Relationships,

Feelings of Fit, Assessment of Value, and Challenges Encountered. Gone from the list

was Expectations, an interesting development discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

I avoided forcing concepts into just one category, allowing them overlap as

necessary, resulting in *common purpose, responsiveness, goals, support, understanding,*

respect, flexibility, interaction, and *caring* overlapping Importance of Relationships and

Feelings of Fit, and *costs* overlapping Assessment of Value and Challenges Encountered.

I photographed this alignment then went back to linking the categories, subcategories,

properties and dimensions to begin integrating and refining the categories. In a later

review I removed the property "cost/benefit" after deciding it was covered under the

property "cost" thereby making four categories with 70 properties. During still another

review, I determined that two of the properties under value, "return on investment" and

"application of learning" were actually subcategories to value.

I applied Merriam's (2009) criteria for devising categories and resolved the issue

of mutual exclusivity by carefully examining each overlapping concept. Careful analysis

showed *common purpose* was an attribute of participants' Feeling of Fit, *shared goals*

was exclusive to Feelings of Fit, and *responsiveness, understanding, support, respect,*

flexibility, interaction and *caring* as exclusive to Importance of Relationships. *Costs* had

overlapped Challenges Encountered and Assessment of Value, but in returning to the

data, I saw that comments on costs related to issues of value, not ability to pay the tuition,

so it clearly was exclusive to Assessment of Value. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2

Categories and Properties, 4-27-11

Importance of Relationships	Feelings of Fit	Assessment of Value	Challenges Encountered
adult perspective	acceptance	accountability	competing commitments
advice	age comfort	clsrm management	completing priorities
attitude	awareness	collaboration	conflicting responsibility
authenticity	clsrm environment	competency	disappointment
availability	common purpose	constructive fdbk	frustration
caring	enjoyment	content	hoop jumping
commitment	experience	costs	roadblocks
dedication	goals	customer service	sacrifice
encouragement	individuality	efficiency	scheduling
flexibility	learning style	effort	selfishness
guidance	requirements	knowledge	time challenges
interaction	socialization	level of learning	
love of learning	teaching style	need	
love of teaching	treatment	preference	
motivation		relevancy	
passion		rigor	
reliability		standards	
respect		usefulness	
responsiveness			
sharing			
support			
understanding			

My next step was to review each category against a robust sampling of the interviews, using the summaries made during my last review of the interviews. This review added rigor to the process and reassured me that indeed the categories, subcategories and properties adequately reflected the data. This analysis led to my modifying the actual titles of the categories, as I noticed that I tended to see them not just as one word but short phrases. Relationships was actually Importance of Relationships, Fit was Feelings of Fit; Value was Assessment of Value; and Challenges was Challenges Encountered. Satisfied that the four category headings could account for all the concepts identified, it was time to move forward with selective coding, a process of integrating and refining the categories into a larger theoretical scheme, a process that begins with discovery of a central category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Generating Categories: An Illustration

To illustrate the process of category building, I will use data solely from the interviews of Focus Group A and three other participants, less than one-fifth of this study's interviews. This is not a moment by moment representation, in that I use examples from my 1st focus group and my 3rd, 5th and 6th one-on-one interviews to illustrate the development of one category.

In coding my first interview, Focus Group A, several concepts were identified based upon their responses to the open-ended invitation to share about their college experiences. Remember that the invitation was to share any sort of experience, be it positive, neutral or negative, and that I had offered five areas of potential experiences, not to limit their responses, but merely to help them start thinking about college experience in

general. The following list does not come close to the number of concepts identified, but

are provided from that list to help illustrate the process used in identifying categories.

Raylie who was first to speak, told of her dealing with a previous college, one she

left because of the experiences.

It matters a lot because [school name] made me crazy, I mean…I just can't do this

for four years when I'm working full time…and try to remain married, because

I'm spending half of my day trying to chase down who am I supposed to get to

sign what, and is that really what I'm supposed to do.... You know that kind of

stuff and it was literally sucking half of my day and I thought, this was a mistake,

I can't do this, this is another layer or two that I can't handle. (34-41)

Based on those six lines I listed concepts of *frustration* (I can't do this),

conflicting responsibilities (working full time), *competing commitments* (try to remain

married), *time challenges*, (spending half my day), *efficiency* and *customer service*

(trying to chase down), *disappointment* (I thought it was a mistake), and others. Raylie

went on to address the cost piece of the equation in regard to her frustration, "[I] thought,

hmm, maybe this isn't really worth it…not something I really need to do if it's going to

be this ridiculous and this, this prohibitive cost wise" (101-104)

To illustrate the benefit of close scrutiny of the data to avoid missing a

phenomenon offered by someone who does not say much, or does not exhibit much

obvious emotion in their comments, I offer Rick's single sentence, "I gave them my Visa

card and they said they don't take Visa…which kind of upset me…I don't have the

money" (49-50). I coded Rick's comment as *frustration* and *customer service,* as

although Rick would probably call it a minor frustration, others commented that it might

be the cumulative effect of frustrations that influences decisions on persistence. The two

concepts, frustration and customer service also illustrate a challenge to effective coding,

as the term frustration offers a pretty clear understanding whereas customer service does

not. In Rick's example it was offered as poor customer service whereas in a different

example a participant could be commenting on the benefit of great customer service

influencing them. This requires the researcher to be very familiar with the data.

Mia and Matt both spoke to less than positive experiences in the classroom

environment that I coded as several concepts. Mia said,

> He came in an opened the book and read to us off the pages and that was the
>
> class. And I was offended as a doctoral student, we didn't discuss, it was awful,
>
> and he still teaches here…. It was a waste of… money and time. (192-196)

Note that in addition to the obvious concepts of *costs* (from Assessment of Value) and

time challenges (it was a waste of money and time), there are also issues of *respect* (I was

offended), *disappointment* (it was awful), and *accountability* (he still teaches here).

Matt's comments flow along the same lines in describing his classroom experience (it

deserves comment that Matt said this was his only bad experience), "It was more of a

waste of time than anything else, it was… just so disappointing to sit in a class that

clearly was beneath the level of everybody" (208-212). Here again we have concepts

regarding *time challenges* (a waste of time) and *disappointment* (just so disappointing),

plus level of learning and *content* (clearly beneath the level of everybody). There are

more concepts folded within the data cited so far, but these illustrate the process of open

coding to this point.

So from just four participants in one focus group interview I identified 12 concepts. To illustrate the coding that occurs in one-on-one interviews, and to continue the discussion on creating categories, I offer excerpts from three of the one-on-one interviews, however, I will discontinue the use of parenthetical comments to illustrate the concepts, trusting that is clear at this point. Linda spoke to *time challenges* and *competing commitments*, "The biggest drawback to all this is just time…. Even when you go home, there's just so much work to do" (206-214). Terry referred to *sacrifice* with her comment, "sometimes I worry about the price you pay in order to go for this goal, what are you saying no to" (220-221). In describing the necessity to take certain mandatory classes that did not seem pertinent to her studies, Kathy used a term that three others used and several others made comments along the same lines so I identified it as an in vivo code, meaning it was taken from a participants' own words, (Kathy's) *hoop jumping*; "it felt like a hoop I had to jump through. There weren't that many classes like that but just enough that it was noticeable" (604-605).

As Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommend, I began to group similar concepts, with the group collected from these four interviews providing the following list: *frustration, conflicting responsibilities, competing commitments, time challenges, efficiency, customer service, disappointment, costs, respect, accountability, level of learning, content, sacrifice,* and *hoop jumping;* 14 concepts which I grouped as shown in Table 3.

Certainly the grouping is open to argument, a point Strauss and Corbin (1998) make clear in citing Paul Atkinson who said any one project could yield several different ways of bringing it together (as cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Table 3

Sample Concept Grouping to Form Potential Categories

Challenges Encountered	Assessment of Value	Importance of Relationships
frustration	costs	respect
conflicting responsibility	efficiency	
competing commitments	customer service	
time challenges	accountability	
disappointment	level of learning	
sacrifice	content	
hoop jumping		

The development of concepts continued throughout all interviews, but as early as the end of the first focus group interview some concepts were beginning to present as potential categories; "concepts, derived from data, that stand for phenomena" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 114). Just as Strauss and Corbin suggest, these potential categories could answer the question, *What is going on here*? and depicting the "problems, issues, concerns, and matters that are important to those being studied" (p. 114). This is where the process gets more complicated, as to begin forming groups of concepts I had to identify common links, but I did not have a label in mind as I began. The two concepts that stood out to me both in how the data was presented and in then looking at the concepts listed, were *conflicting responsibilities* and *competing commitments* which brought to mind challenges students face, especially adult students who because of their age, often have multiple events competing for their attention.

When this insight came to me, which was actually during my analysis of Linda's interview (my 3rd one-on-one interview) so it was early in my data collection and data analysis, I made a memo listing challenges as a strong potential for a category and noting the mild possibility it could wind up being a central category. The memo reminded me to conduct comparisons between this data, data I had received from the previous interviews, and future data collections. This illustrates the value of constant comparison as with this potential category in mind, I adjusted my subsequent interviews to ensure I was alert for phenomenon related to challenges and if it was not volunteered, I would ask about challenges participants had faced. Interestingly, I seldom had to ask, as this was a topic readily volunteered.

My next step in the process was to look at the other potential categories I had grouped and ask myself if the other terms could be subcategories, responding to the who, what, where, when, how and why of these potential categories, or if they helped develop the category *challenges* in terms of its properties; "general or specific characteristic or attributes of a category" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 117). Being glad I did not have to commit completely this early, I decided to consider the other concepts/categories as properties of the category challenges, but made another memo to revisit this topic and to consider whether or not I had properly labeled the category.

Later in the analysis, after adding the last two items in column one of Table 3, as well as a few other concepts I modified the title to "Challenges Encountered" deciding on that over "Challenges Faced" out of concern that challenges faced might imply the challenges were overcome and that was not the issue. The same focus group interview

and interviews of Linda, Terry and Kathy also provided significant data for development

of the other three categories as well.

Addressing Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

The process of integration was both exciting and a bit intimidating. Exciting in

the sense of beginning to see what the analysis suggested, but intimidating because of

needing to ensure all analysis was as objective as possible. Strauss and Corbin (1998)

comment on the fact that within analysis there is some degree of interpretation and

selectivity, pointing out very clearly that integration is hard work. Qualitative research

has borrowed from quantitative in its desire to provide evidence of validity and

reliability, but some argue that such verbiage is outdated and that what qualitative

research is really seeking is evidence of trustworthiness. Whatever words are preferred, I

worked hard to ensure others could have confidence appropriate measures were taken to

conduct all aspects of this study in an ethical, reliable, valid and trustworthy manner.

Being keenly aware that my status as a researcher who also meets the definition of

the research participants could lead to more challenge in objectivity, I diligently

documented every major decision made in conducting this study within the body of this

paper as a detailed audit trail. I also requested and received peer review as discussed by

Merriam (2009) on one of the focus group interviews and two of the one-on-one

interviews. Additional steps taken to provide this support included the employment of

Miles and Huberman's (1994) "Tactics for Testing or Confirming Findings" (p. 262).

The full details of this effort are included in Chapter Four: Findings, but in brief these

tactics outline actions researchers can take to check their own take on the analysis.

One of the tactics I relied heavily on was getting feedback from informants, a form of member checking as Merriam (2009) refers to it, reaching out to fellow doctoral students and one of my committee members to review my initial list of concepts, list of emerging categories, and initial list of potential categories. After receiving support that my progression from concepts to potential categories appeared logical and well supported by the data, and my findings were logical and in line with the data, I soon reached out via email (Appendix E) to participants, asking them to review the central category and comment on their views of the role it played in their college experiences. In a later email (Appendix F) I asked participants to review the main categories, subcategories, properties and dimensions to see if they heard their own voice with them, and to provide their assessment of the proposed theory presented to explain how college experiences influenced their decisions on persistence. In both instances I received comments actively supporting my findings.

In conducting selective coding, I closely followed the guidelines of Strauss and Corbin (1998), including Strauss' (1987) six criteria for choosing a central category. These criteria, as with Miles and Huberman's (1994) tactics are detailed in Chapter Four. Another key step taken to enhance the trustworthiness of this study was the proactive use of memoing. As Strauss and Corbin point out, memos are a running log of analytical sessions, a storehouse of ideas considered during the coding and analysis. In the early stages I used memos to document every decision I made such as how I perhaps altered an interview based upon data received from a previous interview or from more detailed analysis; how I decided what order to review the transcripts when there was more than one; and what my thoughts were about words chosen to represent simple concepts.

As this study progressed I included memos on early thoughts regarding category development, the potential for a central category, and how I would proceed. Memoing became especially important as patterns began to emerge in the data, as it allowed me to note my own emerging ideas on the data, yet keep looking closely at new data without undue influence from the last thought. Memos were the key to my ability to reconstruct the details of the research when it came time to put it all on paper. As Miles and Huberman (1994) astutely point out, people are meaning finders, able to quickly make sense of even chaotic events; seeking to "keep the world consistent and predictable by organizing and interpreting it" (p. 245). This is especially true for me with my background as an investigator, and that is why the memos were so valuable to me, as they were like case notes and investigative leads I was used to making.

To ensure all aspects of this study were conducted in an ethical manner I first obtained Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Missouri-St. Louis and from College A and College B. College B's approval was granted through their Office of Research and Sponsored Programs based on a review of College A's approval package and was issued via email (a copy is maintained in my files). IRB approval was not needed for the one participant who had attended College C as she no longer had any ties to the school. All participants were provided a copy of the Informed Consent Letter (Appendix G) and one signed copy is maintained by me with other study documents. The letter explained their participation was strictly voluntary; that they could withdraw from the study at any time; and that their true identity would remain anonymous, being referred to in the study only by pseudonyms. Further, they were assured that all copies of

their interview recordings, transcriptions, and memos were maintained by me on a

password protected computer or in a locked facility until they were destroyed.

Summary

In this chapter I provided an overview of the research design employed in this

study, including a brief explanation on the selection of qualitative research over

quantitative and of grounded theory over other qualitative research methodologies. I

provided an overview of grounded theory research including a discussion of its canons

and procedures as those are the methods I use from start to finish. Within this

methodology chapter I provided details of the participants and sampling method used and

explained the interview strategies employed in data collection via two focus group

interviews and 19 one-on-one interviews.

I also explained the move from open coding to axial coding and the development

of categories, including how I used Merriam's (2009) criteria for devising categories and

Guba and Lincoln's (1981) guidelines for developing categories, to supplement Strauss

and Corbin's (1998) guidance. To illustrate how data analysis led to the development of

the four categories described in Chapter Four, I detailed the process followed in the early

stages of developing the category, Assessment of Value, using examples from analysis of

the Focus Group A' interview and three one-on-one interviews.

In closing out the chapter I address the very important topics of validity,

reliability, and ethics, providing details of the steps I have take to ensure the highest

levels of confidence in each of these areas.   Chapter four provides the findings of this

study, including detailed descriptions of the four categories, and leading to Chapter

Five's identification of a central category of construction of a theoretical scheme.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

In exploring how college experiences influence adult students decisions on persistence, this study began with one assumption; that college experiences, as perceived by the students, *did* influence their decisions on persistence. This chapter will describe how the accuracy of the assumption is supported by the data analysis, and it will add other important information regarding the role students' perceptions played in assessing the experiences.

This chapter also provides details on the use of grounded theory to progress from the earliest stages of data collection through the complex data analysis that led to the identification of four categories: (a) Importance of Relationships, (b) Assessment of Value, (c) Feelings of Fit, and (d) Challenges Encountered. In detailing the development of these categories, to include identifying their subcategories, properties and dimensions, this chapter brings structure to the analysis conducted and paves the way for the use of selective coding detailed in Chapter Five to identify the very important, central category. The chapter then concludes with a look at how these findings relate to the five main areas of interaction presented in each interview as potential areas of college experience, College Business Processes, Support Service, Student/Advisor Interactions, Classroom Environment, and Feelings of Fit.

Supporting the Assumption

Had this study's findings not supported the initial assumption that college experiences, as perceived by adult students, influenced their decisions on persistence, all would not have been lost, as other valuable information was still gained. Most significant

is the data gained on how college experiences influence adult students' perceptions of their college experiences, and what experiences matter and why. That said, the analysis did support the assumption, only adding more importance to all the findings.

Perhaps the most clear support comes from 21 of the study's 26 participants reporting that based at least in part upon their college experiences they had: (a) already left a college program, (b) seriously considered departing one, or (c) issued an *if/then* statement regarding the potential to depart (*if* X occurs or continues to occur, *then* I will depart). These participants' assertions were backed up comments they made throughout their focus group and/or one-on-one interviews regarding their college experiences.

Within this finding was that students' perceptions of their college experiences do influence them, was the observation that students' perceptions of the experiences included at least some measure of assessment regarding the experience.

Assessing the Experience

As the interviews progressed and data began to grow to where I began forming potential categories, I noted that as participants told of experiences, they generally shared some form of assessment they made of the experiences as well. These assessments were represented as some fashion of a positive, negative or neutral.

Examples of this assessment of experiences include Mia's praise of the support she receives from the library staff, "many times I've appreciated those people" (159), and Sienna's disappointment the school had closed a cafeteria used by working students, "it makes a difference to a busy professional who's coming not from home but straight from work" (181-182). Within both of these is an assessment, maybe not a significant one, but Mia's reflects a positive assessment and Sienna's a negative one. Other comments reflect

essentially a neutral assessment, suggesting students notice and assess the experience but at least at the moment do not assign it as positive or negative. This "neutral" assessment is less common in the data but is well illustrated in the Focus Group A discussion regarding new technology available at a campus office. When Raylie said she did not know about it but it would have been helpful, another participant said the college should have made it known, Raylie replied, "Well I think it was my fault, not their fault" (174).

This finding that students essentially assign some form of a positive, negative, or neutral assessment to their experiences is not meant to suggest students are knowingly applying any sort of scorecard to their college experiences with a set score meaning the difference in persistence or departure. Even if there were such a process, it would be quite complicated as assessments of experiences could fall within a very wide range of assessment, however, in the 21 of 26 participants commenting on their previous departure from college, serious consideration of departure, or consideration of an if/then situation, there is evidence assessments of experiences matter.

Logic supports the idea that experiences assessed as positive tend to influence students towards persistence, and negative experiences would influence students towards departure. Addressing the degree of influence is beyond the scope of this study, however, analysis showed through participants' comments that things seen as positive but of minor consequence could have a passive influence, leading participants to not really even think about the experience in their continuing to sign up for and attend classes as essentially a matter of routine. However, experiences that are seen as very positive can excite participants' towards the next opportunity to be in classes, such that they sign up for early registration to ensure they get the classes they most desire.

Experiences assessed as negative can be from minor to significant with students reacting somewhere along a continuum that includes participants: (a) continuing to persist, but with a sense of caution or concern, (b) persisting with the approach that if the negative experiences continue or worsen they seriously consider departing; essentially the *if/then* perspective, (c) giving serious consideration to departing, maybe taking a semester off, or (d) deciding to depart from college without achieving their goals.

Assessment of experiences as neutral is a bit of a misnomer, as participants never used the term, primarily commenting only on positive or negative experiences, however, analysis suggests that in basically neutral experiences, students tend to persist as long as external factors remain stable. While individual students may make individual decisions based on single experiences, taking the data collectively suggests students do not make single assessments and then stand by that throughout their time at college, but instead that each experience is considered and if necessary the overall assessment is then adjusted.

The Persistence/Departure Equation

This finding revealed another detail about the role the assessments of college experiences play in students' decisions on persistence, that being that adult students, and perhaps all students, appear to be engaged in an ongoing overall assessment of their college experiences that influences their decisions on persistence. I refer to this as the *persistence/departure equation,* simply stated this represents a recurring question all students must answer every semester, "do I stay or do I go?"

The findings that college experiences, as perceived by adult students can influence their decisions on persistence, and that students are engaged in an ongoing persistence/departure equation is important information but of little use without the next

set of findings that describe the experiences that matter to the students, and most

importantly, shed light on how these experiences might ultimately influence students'

decisions on persistence or departure.

Collecting the data from the participants was a somewhat slow and methodical

process which began with asking the participants to share their thoughts on their various

college experiences as they came to them. Though they were provided with a title for

five major areas where college experiences might logically occur: business processes,

student services, student/ advisor interactions, the classroom environment, and feelings of

fit, they were not asked to confine themselves to discussion of experiences within those

areas, but were encouraged to talk about any college experiences. Applying grounded

theory methods of open and axial coding, along with constant comparisons first identified

dozens of concepts from among the participants' stories, that as data analysis continued

and patterns began to develop, similar concepts were grouped under more abstract

headings leading to the development of categories.

This technique of using an open-ended invitation to share experiences was very

productive and reduced the chance something would be missed because I did not ask

about it in just the right way. It also allowed the participants to talk more freely, not so

worried about whether they were providing the information I was looking for. The end

result was a rich base of data that became the categories: Importance of Relationships,

Assessment of Value, Feelings of Fit, and Challenges Encountered, and was then used in

constructing a central category that led to the development of theory used to answer the

research question and explain how college experiences influence persistence.

It may seem that identifying what experiences matter most to adult students is best suited for use of a student survey, but Michele's comment on her experiences as an adult student illustrate it is not so simple, "This time, everything matters" (442). While some experiences may have greater influence than others, this study did not engage in weighting the phenomenon, at least not as a survey might. It did, however, identify hundreds of phenomena the participants revealed as mattering to them (Michele's everything), then through data analysis it reduced the hundreds to just four central ideas referred to here as the four categories, or as appropriate for this chapter, four findings.

The Four Categories

Table 2 in Chapter Three presented just the categories and properties. Figure 1 expands the list, adding the subcategories and dimensions developed in analyzing the data. The descriptive phrases used in the dimensional ranges are unorthodox but were created to represent the participants' perspectives. Figure 1 is formatted to allow viewing of all the data on one page, however, the same data is attached in a more readable version as Appendix C.

Figure 1 *Categories, Subcategories, Properties and Dimensions*

Category: Importance of Relationships

Subcategories: Student/Instructor; Student/Advisor;
Student/Peer;
Student/College

Student/Instructor & Student/Advisor

Property:	Dimension:
P: adult perspective	D: student is a student - opinion valued
P: advice	D: on your own - cares about result
P: attitude	D: just a job - students matter
P: authenticity	D: shallow - sincere
P: availability	D: email me - just drop by
P: caring	D: just a number - really matter
P: commitment	D: in my class? - every student matters
P: communication	D: check your email - let's talk
P: dedication	D: just a job - job one
P: encouragement	D: no emotion - pump you up
P: engagement	D: impersonal - personally involved
P: flexibility	D: inflexible - considerate of situation
P: guidance	D: find own way - helpful planner
P: interaction	D: non-existent - personally involved
P: love of learning	D: grade focused - love to learn
P: love of teaching	D: isn't this over - it's over already?
P: motivation	D: collecting paycheck - help students
P: passion	D: reads the slides - keeps it fresh
P: reliability	D: unreliable - can be counted on
P: respect	D: impersonal - mutual respect
P: responsiveness	D: overlooked - let's talk about…
P: sharing	D: private - collaborative
P: support	D: on an island - you matter to me
P: understanding	D: no empathy - let's talk about it

Student/Peer

P: adult perspective	D: just an old guy - what do you think?
P: attitude	D: do my own thing - in this together
P: authenticity	D: shallow - sincere
P: encouragement	D: too bad for you - you can do it
P: engagement	D: busy texting - call on me!
P: interaction	D: non-existent - personally involved
P: love of learning	D: grade focused - love to learn
P: motivation	D: get a grade - here to learn
P: reliability	D: where is he? - good team member
P: sharing	D: sorry, I'm texting - collaborative

Student/College

P: adult perspective	D: do's & don'ts - let's find a way
P: attitude	D: it's a business - here for students
P: availability	D: open 8 to 4 - adult friendly hours
P: cared about	D: just a number - really matter
P: dedication	D: dropping? okay - retention focused
P: interaction	D: non-existent - personally involved
P: motivation	D: take a number - glad you're here
P: responsiveness	D: overlooked - let's talk about…

Category: Feeling of Fit

Subcategories: Student/Instructor, Student/Advisor, Student/Peer, Student College

All Subcategories

PROPERTY:	DIMENSION:
P: acceptance	D: feel like outsider - totally accepted/welcomed
P: age comfort	D: stood out - no age among us
P: awareness	D: what do you need - let me tell you about…
P: classroom layout	D: fourth grade desks - adult learning environment
P: common purpose	D: on your own - all in this together
P: enjoyment	D: needles in my eyes - phenomenal class
P: experience	D: not recognized - valued and highlighted
P: goals	D: unimportant - goals supported
P: individuality	D: a student is a student - uniqueness respected
P: learning style	D: just tell me what I need - challenge me
P: requirements	D: busy work or extreme - challenging but reasonable
P: socialization	D: no connection - socialize outside of class
P: teaching style	D: reading the next slide - facilitative learning
P: treatment	D: jerked around - treated as an adult

Category: Assessment of Value

Subcategories: Return on Investment, Application of Learning; Love of Learning

All Subcategories

PROPERTY:	DIMENSION:
P: accountability	D: how do you keep this job - student feedback counts
P: class management	D: utter chaos - expert facilitation
P: collaboration	D: to each his own - there's power in sharing
P: competency	D: how did you get this job - you really know this stuff
P: constructive fdbck	D: no feedback - detailed corrections and suggestions
P: content	D: a complete waste - learned something everyday
P: costs	D: king's ransom - reasonable expense
P: customer service	D: not in the business of - here for the students
P: efficiency	D: get the run around - logical and intuitive
P: effort	D: phoning it in - constantly updating
P: knowledge	D: read the book - wrote the book
P: level of learning	D: beneath most students - I learned so much
P: need	D: something to do - I need this, to do something
P: preferences	D: just make it through - challenge me to learn
P: relevance	D: not what I needed - this is on the mark
P: reward	D: why do I care - this matters to me
P: rigor	D: this is grad school? - had to stretch, but made it
P: standards	D: I expect more - sets the bar high
P: usefulness	D: waste of my time, money, energy - I can use this

Category: Challenges Encountered

PROPERTY:	DIMENSION:
P: competing priorities	D: stressful - no big deal
P: competing commitments	D: guilt feelings - clear conscience
P: conflicting responsibilities	D: can't do both - make adjustments
P: disappointment	D: why bother - soon forgotten
P: frustration	D: can't stand it - oh well
P: hoop jumping	D: like a trained dog - check the box
P: roadblocks	D: significant detour - bump in the road
P: sacrifice	D: great sacrifice -minor inconvenience
P: scheduling	D: real impediment - inconvenience
P: selfishness	D: singular focus - self-protective
P: time challenges	D: no moment to spare - less free time

Merriam (2009) commented that, "devising categories is largely an intuitive process" (p. 183) and if she had stopped there, perhaps Chapter Three and this chapter could have been much shorter, but she wisely went on to say, "but it is also systematic and informed by the study's purpose, the investigator's orientation and knowledge, and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves" (pp. 183-184). In describing the categories this analysis developed, I will take them one at a time, first providing a description of the category to explain what it is about, then illustrating the meaning as made explicit by the participants, and finally explaining why this finding is important.

Importance of Relationships

The category can also be described with statements such as *relationships influence perceptions* and *relationships are important in how students perceive college experiences,* but the message that is clear in the data right from the beginning is that relationships matter, at every level. This category represents phenomena the participants clearly cared about, and it refers to relationships between themselves and their instructors and advisor(s), between themselves and their class peers; and themselves and the overall college like the various staff members they will interact with such as people working at the library, in graduate school offices, support services and the like.

This category provides a wealth of information related to the research questions as relationships are integral to the student and advisor experiences, the experiences within the classroom environment and of course students feelings of fit. Truly the category informs the research questions on business processes and support services as well because any interaction between students and their college experience is likely to involve some aspect of subcategories, properties and dimensions of Importance of Relationships.

The *college* part of Student/ College relationships can also refer to aspects of the college

not related to people, such as feelings towards the college's reputation, its facilities, or

just overall feel.

Every participant spoke to some aspect of relationships as influencing their

feelings about their college experiences, sometimes speaking of them with seemingly

great pleasure in the positive nature of the relationship and other times in far less positive

ways. Subcategories of: Student/Advisor, Student/Instructor Relationships; Student/Peer

Relationships; and Student/College Relationships were identified based on analysis of the

participants' comments regarding relationships with their advisors, instructors, peers, and

others related to the college. As they spoke of these relationships participants made clear

the relationships matter a great deal to them, a point often expressed with accompanying

great emotion.

As Figure 1 and Appendix C show, there are 24 properties listed under the

Student/Instructor and Student/Advisor subcategory of Importance of Relationships,

more than twice that for Student/Peer (10) and Student/College (8) subcategories. As

properties reflect characteristics or aspects of phenomena the category represents, this

difference tends to suggest the complexity of the various relationships, but is not intended

to suggest student/peer or student/college relationship are less important or influential.

That said, participants commented far more frequently on relationships with instructors

and advisors than peers or staff.

While all properties under these subcategories are important, a few stood out as

having the greatest influence on how participants viewed their experiences. The *adult*

perspective, although mentioned in those terms by only a few students it is referred to in

other ways by many and is a property for each of the subcategories with good reason as it

is supported both in the literature and the data. Knowles (1980) points out that adults are

often more self-directed and are more task and problem oriented in their learning

approach. Astin (1977) noted that older students appeared more academically oriented

and interacted with faculty more often than did traditional students. Both of these points

would likely influence the type of relationship adult students would be seeking in their

college experiences.

　　　　The dimensions for *adult perspective* are listed separately for each subcategory.

For student/instructor and student/advisor relationships the dimension range is from

"student is a student" to "value perspective" meaning students could view themselves as

being seen by their instructor or advisor as just another student, with nothing unique

about them that warrants any special attention, or to the opposite end of the spectrum,

where they believe their perspective as an adult student is valued. With student/peer

relationships the dimensions scale runs from "who's the old guy?" to "what's your

opinion?" referring to how the participants related they viewed their peers looking at

them during their encounters. And for the student/college relationships it covers the

range from "campus do's and don'ts" to "let's find a way" referring on the more negative

side the possible view that staff are more concerned with making sure procedures are

followed, than with working to find a way to help.

　　　　Barb, Terry and Dee relate commonly expressed feelings that support the

importance of the adult perspective in relationships. Barb related her very positive

experience, saying "going from treating me like a baby to treating me like an adult, was

an epiphany" (236-237), certainly along the positive end of the dimensional range to

where she felt her perspective was valued, but Terry who left doctoral studies made clear her earlier relationships in a master's program were better than she experienced in her doctoral program, "they were a totally different genre of teachers…treated us all as adult learners. They assume you're going to be competent, and you're going to do a great job, and I love that, totally love that" (736-740).   That example would fall more to the end of "a student is a student."

Dee expressed her own view of adult students and therefore the adult perspective, a view that was echoed by many of the participants, "I think adults, when we return, we are knowledgeable enough to know we're going to do whatever it takes, because most people who are older, they know what's required of them and they get the job done" (298-302). While this was a self-view, albeit one shared by others, it primarily represents how Dee sees herself, which of course would likely reflect how she expects others to see her as well. Naturally then, she would not want to be viewed as "just another student."

The property of *advice* refers to data on the importance of sharing advice as part of the relationship, and the dimensional range was from "on your own" to "cares about you." The literature offers some concerns in this area that tend to fall to the "on your own" end of the spectrum, with McGivney (1996) asserting that of adult students who leave college before completion too many received little or no advice before starting an advanced course, and little or no advice prior to leaving. That position is supported by Kathy's comment "I was required to pick an advisor…and I had no clue how to pick a PhD advisor," (50-51) followed by a related comment later, "I didn't know how to go about getting PhD advice" (467) and in describing her interactions when getting an advisor she stated, "she's really busy and the few times I'd tried to contact her, she didn't

return my emails" (471-472), definitely the low end of the dimension. Kathy eventually left a funded doctoral program. Further illustrating the importance of an active advising relationship. When Terry, another student who walked away from a funded doctoral program was asked what might have kept her in school, answered, "Maybe the opportunity to really talk about the real issues, like… this is an impediment, I don't know how to get around it" (852-853), once again sounding like a student who was essentially on her own.

It should be noted that no findings or examples like Kathy's and Terry's decisions to depart college are meant to criticize their advisors, instructors or the college, as stated earlier, this is not an assessment of anyone or the college, rather the intent is to illustrate how the participants' perspectives of their experiences influence their decisions on persistence. In Terry's case she had many positive things to say about her college experiences, but the data suggests these less positive experiences influenced her towards departing rather than persisting.

Addressing these two properties individually is not intended to imply greater importance, as that can only be determined by the individual actors involved, however, because of their frequent recurrence in the data, they do stand out in this study. That said, while each of these properties can stand alone, grouping some by similar aspects can help illustrate this category and the properties' linkage. Simple groupings include *availability, interaction, reliability* and *responsiveness,* all properties that when present, were referred to by participants in describing positive relationships, as Elise illustrates,

> I just really appreciate that [availability] in an instructor, and also his dedication
> to students of helping them find internships, guiding them in their right way and

giving them other opportunities. And his door doesn't close, just because his

class is over he still stays in touch with students and he follows up on them. I just

admire that from a professor…. (779-783)

In supporting the point that the absence of these traits impacts negatively, Elise had only

two experiences in college that she considered bad and she brought them both up as the

flip side of the above example, continuing her comments,

That's in contrast to the English professor. He didn't make that much of an effort

to get to know you or to discuss with you…. He just wasn't that interested.

Maybe that's what it is, maybe it's the interest that the instructor shows in a

student, and that was the same issue I had with the Algebra teacher. (783-789)

In grouping the properties of *caring, commitment, dedication, engagement,* and

support, again the presence of these in relationships was a positive, with participants

describing such experiences very positively. Barb commented on the importance of a

caring instructor, "And you have a resource to go to! That's what makes it bearable….

Not that you get the answers from the instructor, but you get direction, and that's what

makes a difference" (473-478).   Mike described this sort of positive experience in these

words, "My favorite classes are those that are challenging and have rigor, the professor is

competent, and is excited about it and those professors have really challenged me… and

respects your opinions" (280). Mike's words are useful in illustrating the property *rigor*

of the category Assessment of Value discussed later in this chapter.

Other attributes of the subcategory of student/instructor and student/advisor

relationships include *encouragement, guidance, sharing, understanding, and flexibility,*

attributes that suggest participants' desire for some recognition of their role as adult

students, wanting, perhaps needing encouragement and guidance, especially for students who have more recently returned to school after a significant absence. Sharing can be an especially important attribute of relationships for these participants as it can help allay worries they are unique in their concerns as an adult student. Linda commented on the value of sharing among her class peers, "I have just been so inspired by them they are just so willing to share what they know and have kind of taken me as a colleague" (53-55), and Jenni talked about when she got the courage to speak out in a polite challenge to the instructor and he responded positively, "I…explained my point and he's like thank you that's the kind of information we need to share in this class" (551-553). Karen also mentioned the value of sharing, commenting how she progressed over the span of a few semesters, "I lost about 15 years of my life, so I went to school in order to really learn, so the first few classes I listened, I listened to other people, but then I started to kind of share, and…they would make a comment and I would…. And I was accepted so overwhelmingly that now, I'm a leader in the class (236-246).

Understanding and *flexibility* fold in well with this discussion as several participants spoke to the need for instructors and others to understand some of the challenges they face often as full time workers, and to offer flexibility in their expectations of the student.

William speaks to this in comments on how pleased he is in his current school, especially in comparison to the one he left, "I don't want to be treated as just a number, not that you need to roll out the red carpet for me or make any special exceptions or anything, just be, upfront with me and look at my situation uniquely" (117-120).

The importance of this sort of flexible and understanding relationship is

highlighted by other comments William made suggesting frustration with the lack of

rigor in classes, with what he considers poor attitudes of class peers, and teaching styles

that do not mesh well with his learning style. He made clear that the college's flexibility

in working with him on a unique degree plan far exceeded his expectations, while also

admitting that his academic experiences had been below his expectations. William's case

is discussed further in the typology section later in this chapter.

The properties of *love of learning, love of teaching, motivation* and *passion* speak

clearly to examples from the data of students' love of their college experiences, however,

along with the positive emotion can come equally strong reactions to perceptions these

attributes are not in place in the relationships. On the positive side, Jenni commented,

"the instructors are not just there for the money, they actually care about what they're

teaching, and they have that passion…instructors that actually do it, because they love it.

Those are the ones you want to learn from" (281-286). When those attributes are

missing, sometimes the best you can do is use the relationship as an example to avoid as

Mike points out, "Some classes I remember a lot of things from, some I remember a few

things from, and some classes are helpful because I may say, 'Well I'm certainly not

going to teach like that person did'" (364-366).

In closing out the review of the category Importance of Relationships, I identified

attitude, authenticity, and *respect* as the three final properties. I mentioned before how

the presence of the properties described earlier led to positive perceptions of the

experiences, and the same is true with these three, however, their absence, or presence on

the negative side of these three attributes is probably more influential on adult students'

perceptions of their relationship experiences, than any other.

Charla puts her concerns about an instructor's attitude fairly politely, "I just wasn't quite sure why she was teaching. I don't know how else to say that, because she was very good, very smart, but I think she probably needed to stay in the business world…. I always felt like she wanted you to know that she knew more than you did (599-604). Becky, in responding to a comment about a professor who seemed always to want to impress by his position said, "if you're the department head, then do your job, and tell me that there was a reason why you became the department head, and not just because they rotate that, because we're not all that stupid!" (445-448). William spoke to the importance of respect, especially in challenging programs, "I think, I really think there has to be an interest, a shared interest, a shared respect level if this is going to be successful for the doctoral student. Even for masters students to a degree but particularly for the doctoral student, I think it's pretty important" (325-328).

The literature speaks strongly on this with Braxton et al. (2004) harsh sounding hypothesis that "Faculty violations of the proscriptive norms of inattentive planning, inadequate course design, insufficient syllabus, uncommunicated course details, inadequate communication, condescending negativism, personal disregard, and particularistic grading negatively affect the academic and intellectual development of undergraduate college students" (p. 43). As stated, this seems a harsh hypothesis, however, it does illustrate that multiple aspects of relationships, can influence students' perceptions of their college experiences. The data suggests that indeed relationships can essentially make or break the bond between student and the college, and even if students persist, their perception of those relationships will likely influence how students speak of

their college experiences to others, potentially influencing the college positively or negatively, long after the students have departed.

Assessment of Value

The category Assessment of Value is another central idea the data suggested was of significant importance to adult students. Participants revealed they assess their experiences via two primary equations which are identified as Value's subcategories: Return on Investment, and Application of Learning. The properties and dimensions identified are applicable to both subcategories. Clearly participants' perceptions of the value of their experiences influence their decisions on persistence at some level. Common sense tells us that if the students considered their experiences to be of high value, they would logically be inclined to continue with such experiences, barring external factors.

Conversely, if they considered their experiences to be of low value, then again common sense suggests they would seek other experiences; not necessarily immediately, but at some point if the low value experiences continued, essentially an *if/then* situation emerged as described earlier. Both of these are dependent upon the assumption that value of experiences matters to the students, and the analysis shows it does. As stated, five of this study's participants are non-completed students, with each one of them determining at some point that the potential *reward* (one of Value's properties) was not enough to warrant their persistence in college. I am not suggesting they used these words, but the analysis shows the non-completers made a decision and that at least part of that decision was related to their assessment of the value of the end product, the reward, or simply, the degree.

Appropriately, the dimensional range for reward runs from "why do I care" to "this strongly matters to me." It is worth noting that in addition to the five officially categorized as non-completed students, all but five of the study's 26 participants stated they had either previously left a college program, had given serious thought to leaving, or had issued an if/then statement essentially stating *if* some phenomenon they did not like continued, *then* they would leave. Although this may suggest Value could be identified as a central category, after seriously considering the possibility I discarded it in favor of a more encompassing central category discussed in Chapter Five.

While all properties apply to both subcategories, return on investment and application of learning, the subcategories do just as intended, in this instance explaining aspects of the what and why of assessing the value of college experience. They also help illustrate the varying perspectives students take in assessing the value of their college experiences. The data clearly shows participants are looking for a positive college experience, both in the return on their investment of time, money and energy and the applicability of the learning.

The literature supports the category Assessment of Value, through Donaldson et al. (1993) list of frequently mentioned attributes adult learners expect of effective instructors that included *knowledgeable and relevant.* All the other attributes they listed fall under the category of Importance of Relationships. To illustrate the properties under Assessment of Value, I crafted a sample statement of work that includes the subcategories and every property:

> To ensure return on investment and application of learning, the preference is that
>
> colleges practice good customer service and put forth the effort to furnish

competent, knowledgeable instructors who practice efficient classroom

management and promote collaboration while providing rigor and a high level of

learning and constructive feedback, on content students need while holding

parties accountable to put forth the effort to meet standards so the rewards are

worth the costs.

Of course this is an artificial example, but it can effectively represent what this

category is about in the perspective of the participants. Participant comments show

students routinely assess the value of their college experiences, and not just in the

classroom, but across the spectrum of college experiences. Granted, until reaching ABD

status, the majority of college experiences for adult students will be in the classroom, and

then when starting dissertation work the focus moves to student/advisor relationships yet

again the data suggests many of the properties listed here are still very much in play.

As the properties are all interrelated, they can be looked at in most any grouping

but I first address properties related to the instructor's role: *class management, content*

competency, constructive feedback, knowledge, and *level of learning.* The data are filled

with comments regarding their expectations in classes they consider representative of

good value in college experiences. The words they use are included in the property titles

throughout this category, but participants' comments might surprise, such as identifying

favorite classes as often the hardest classes because they were the most challenging,

comments lamenting the mistaken belief that adult students want to be let out of class

early, and comments as shared earlier in this study that now, everything matters.

The dimensional ranges for these properties include: "utter chaos" to "expert

facilitation," "how did you get this job?" to "you really know this stuff," and "no

feedback" to "detailed corrections and suggestions" (to read the others dimensions, see Figure 1 or Appendix C). A few excerpts that illustrate the sort of comments shared from the data regarding these properties include: "He takes it seriously, he does his homework, and comes prepared to lead a discussion…. He sets pretty high expectations" (Mia, 209-212). "Completely versed and competent in their profession, with a little bit of wit, and ability to interact with the students…. You're constantly challenged" (Angie, 265-273). "I want to have to stretch" (Rick, 401). "He was very involved, he wanted you to get it, he wanted you to succeed" (Cissy, 209-210), and "He is about learning, not about the grade, that's the difference with him" (Cissy, 187-192). "You want to be challenged. You want to learn…. I don't want it to be easy" (Mia, 399-400).

A point that stood out both for what was said and for who it was that said it came from Sienna, one of the quietest participants in the group, who said, "You need to have time and space to say something. I think that's part of the professors' obligation." This was definitely a comment on classroom management because in unmanaged classrooms students who are quieter than others may never be heard. To complete the discussion of those six properties, Cissy offered an example from the less positive side of the assessed value of a classroom with a simple description, "He was horrible!" (226).

Other properties include, *accountability, effort, need, reward,* and *usefulness,* the dimensional ranges for these properties include: "how do you keep this job?" to "student feedback counts" (accountability), "phoning it in" to "constantly updating" (effort), "something to do" to "I need this to do something" (need), "why do I care" to "this matters to me," and "waste of my time, money, energy" to "I can use this" (usefulness).

The role of accountability in the assessment of value was raised in various ways, including several students commenting on wanting instructors to hold them and their peers accountable in classes, but interestingly the issue of college accountability regarding what the participants' considered poor instructors was a strongly felt frustration that was raised at both College A and College B in the focus group interviews.

Mia, at College A commented, "and I was offended as a doctoral student, we didn't discuss, it was awful, *and he still teaches here* [emphasis added] and it's one of those classes that a lot of people have to take and it was a waste" (193). Then sounding disappointingly similar, Rayleen, at College B commented, "so after that class, all of us launched a formal complaint, it was really nasty. And, the department just kind of went, well, thanks for your feedback, *and he's still teaching here* [emphasis added]" (606-609). The almost identical statements highlighted above and echoed by their peers were made by students hundreds of miles apart, one at a private college working on her masters and one at a public school completing her doctorate, and they show these issues matter. Of benefit to this study is that both issues were raised in focus group interviews providing the benefit of observing the reaction of the other participants, and to a person it was clear they were disappointed in the lack of accountability by the colleges.

Participants comments on various experiences involving assessments of value include a straight shooting comment from Kathy regarding usefulness and content, "I'll do the work, but if I can't see the use for it or it just doesn't interest me then I really, I don't know, I overly resent that kind of stuff. So I'm not as compliant a student as I see some are" (634-637). Perhaps that had a role in her decision to depart.

Remaining properties include *collaboration, cost, customer service, efficiency, relevancy, rigor* and *standards.* Collaboration was identified as an important player in the data, with several students referring to the opportunity for collaboration with peers and instructors as a key factor in their assessment of value. Costs had initially been listed under challenges, but as stated, the great majority of references to cost were not along the lines of not being able to pay tuition and other college related monetary costs, but rather were comments on whether or not the college experience was worth the costs. In this instance the data suggests costs include monetary expenses but also costs in the way of time committed, energy spent, and even emotions invested.

Customer service was a property mentioned by nearly all participants but with little suggestion of its importance to the participants. Raylie and William spoke of their pleasure in the customer service they were receiving at their current school, but did so in comparison to bad examples at their previous colleges. Conversely, Terry was displeased with the lack of a customer service focus of her now former college, commenting, "[school name] doesn't have a service mentality, it's not like they say, how can we serve you, no" (671-672). Raylie and William's historical experience of poor customer service and Terry's experience can tie in with Mia and Rayleen's disappointment in the colleges not taking action to remove instructors they felt were poor performers.

Participants commented on the property *efficiency* primarily in relation to the business processes of the colleges, again with Raylie and William referencing the poor efficiency at their previous colleges and being pleased by comparison at their new school. At College B there was very little discussion of efficiency beyond comments that registering and getting authorized for parking on the campus was very easy. Most

comments at College A regarding efficiency were along the lines that having to stand in line to get registered, to get a parking pass, and similar requirements, was just seen as part of the process.

The last remaining properties of r*elevance, rigor, standards and preferences* are ones the data suggest matters a great deal to the participants. The dimensions are: "not what I needed" to "this is on the mark" (relevance); "this is graduate school?" to "I had to stretch, but I made it" (rigor); "I expect more" to "sets the bar high" (standards); and "just make it through" to "challenge me to learn" (preference).

Relevance is a clear property of assessment of value, with participants expecting the classes they take and the work they do in classes to be relevant to the stated objectives of the classes. For the most part the participants assessed the classes they took to be relevant, but in some classes where the participants expressed they were displeased with the experiences, a lack of relevancy was identified as a factor. This finding supported the literature where Donaldson et al. (1993) found that adult students' preferences for what qualified as effective teaching were qualitatively different from those of traditional students, placing greater emphasis on the relevancy of the material; the instructor's openness to questions, and the instructor's show of concern for the student's learning than traditional students.

Rigor, standards and preferences are complimentary properties with the more positive side of the dimensional range for the three including, "I had to stretch but I made it," sets the bar high," and "challenge me to learn," respectively. The call for rigor in the classroom was a recurring theme within the data, with participants either commenting favorably about its presence in classes, or negatively about its lack of presence in others.

Preferences play a significant role in assessments of value as well, in part because in some cases students use the term preference whereas in reality they are really referring to what they absolutely expect to see, not just would prefer.

Feelings of Fit

The category Feelings of Fit can best be presented as, Feelings regarding college fit influence students' perceptions. This category, as with Importance of Relationships also has subcategories of Student/Advisor, Student/Instructor, Student/Peer, and Student/College but in this instance they all have the same properties save for three, *learning style, teaching style,* and *classroom environment* which are unique to the Student/Instructor subcategory. Feelings of Fit represent the phenomenon relating to how adult students feel they fit in their college experiences, and this is an area that can be influenced in many ways as supported by its 14 properties and dimensions (see Figure 1 or Appendix C). It was surprising how many participants told me in the interview why they were adult students, though I never asked a single person that question. The frequency of this occurrence suggests it was important for the participant to establish that point, a phenomenon I take to suggest it was akin to stating, *I am this kind of student and I am here for this reason* or in other words, *this is how I fit.*

Participants spoke often on the obvious issues of feeling they did or did not fit in their college experiences with *age comfort* being a key concept, but one that was almost always tied to whether or not they felt accepted in the classroom by the instructor and their peers. Several participants spoke of being the oldest in the class or at least of expecting to be but then finding out there were other similar aged adults in the classes. To this end, the key initial attribute of feeling that one fits in the college experience was

acceptance, and once participants were beyond that potential hurdle, a point all reached, then other aspects of fit were considered. It is important to note, that although all participants felt *accepted,* they did not all feel they fit, as subsequent examples will show. This of course clarifies that feelings of fit cannot be fully represented by merely addressing one property.

The dimensional range for acceptance runs from "feel like an outsider" to "totally accepted/welcomed" and the data which suggest that the experiences early on run the gambit of those feelings, but for most, they move toward the feelings of *acceptance*. Perhaps the tendency to feel like an outsider early on helps explain the high departure rate for students between the first and second year of college.

It is important to note that the category Fit is not meant to merely refer to students' overall feelings of belonging or comfort in an academic setting. As the subcategories suggest, students may look at most any situation and assess their own feelings of fit. In a classroom students are not just assessing whether or not they *enjoy* the instructor and using that to assess their fit, but data suggests they are also considering the content, asking if it is what they expected in the class, the manner of delivery and assessment, which goes to properties of teaching style and learning style within this category, but also to the categories of Importance of Relationships and Assessment of Value. In assessing their feelings of fit, students consider their peers, not just as related to similarity of age, but also in areas related to feeling a *common purpose* with them, assessing their preparedness for class, motivation for learning, engagement in lessons. Simultaneously they may be assessing the instructors' class management in this area,

asking again whether or not they fit. Sometimes the question can indeed be as simple as,

do I feel comfortable in this setting?

When I asked Focus Group B, from College B what made a class good and what

makes it not so good for them, the immediate response was, "No more desks, conference

tables, those desks are brutal" (Rayleen, 362-364). I expected to hear about instructors or

content, not about *classroom layout*, but Rayleen's response was immediately followed

by near shouts of agreement and personal stories about "those desks." Shannon's telling

comment was, "it's like being…in elementary school" (367).   Data showed the desks

were not just an issue for that focus group either, as many students at both College A and

College B spoke to the issue of the school desks, an aspect of the classroom layout

property of the Student/College subcategory of Feelings of Fit. They mentioned desks,

both as an aspect of their assessment of the value of the course or even the college, but

also within their feelings of fit. In fact so many commented on the poor quality and

aggravation the desks cause that I decided to visit some classrooms and take photos of the

desks. As seen from the photos in Appendix H, the desks are indeed small.

At College A, William stated, "There's some desks…over here that are just

worthless… this is college, get some tables!" (270-273). A more poignant comment

related to Robin's personal sharing, "Sometimes I felt like I didn't fit in the desk, [her

soft laughter], you know, just didn't quite fit in the desk" (230-233). Imagine the

possibilities; how many students do colleges lose because the desks are not appropriate

for adult students?

Several participants spoke to what they saw as a lack of a common purpose

between themselves as adult students and others, and within these comments they

revealed expectations they held of their peers and instructors. Laura commented on the

dichotomy between the younger (20-something students) and the 40-plus students, she

thought it came down to different priorities, then gave an example of a younger student

who was going to use Wikipedia to conduct research, saying "I thought are you kidding

me,…that just doesn't seem scholarly, I mean at the graduate level?... so it does seem

like there was a different perception of what was graduate level" (59-62).

William's frustration with the lack of common purpose was obvious in his

comments regarding other students' approach to class, "It's beyond me about not turning

things in, just ignoring…doing it sloppy, does it have to be typed?... This is college for

god's sake, this is the 21st century, what do you mean does it have to be typed?" (192-

196). And Terry commented on what she perceived as other students' lack of integrity

towards the class, "that was a little disheartening, to see how people were cutting corners

and saying one thing and doing another thing" (305-306). The dimensional range runs

from "on your own" to "all in this together" and these examples certainly lean towards

the feeling of being on one's own. Raylie's comment used also in the Assessment of

Value category illustrated several less direct points participants made about expecting

instructors to play an active role in influencing students' behavior, "I love it when they

have high expectations and they call people on it" (363-364).

These comments lead to two related properties *learning style* and *teaching style*,

both of which are unique to the student/instructor subcategory, and both are addressed

frequently in the literature and in this study's data. Kathy's issue with learning and

teaching style was not that she could not learn from the instructor but that she did not

want to learn that way, as she put it, "I understood what he was getting at but it wasn't, it

wasn't suitable for me to learn that way" (285-295), adding, "I didn't get anything out of

that but I had to do it for the grade" (301-309).

In discussing what made a class an especially positive experience or less than

positive (note I did not ask specifically about instructors), they invariably spoke to

instructors' teaching styles, commonly giving examples of positive styles such as

instructors promoting open exchange of ideas, dialogue versus monologue, instructor

passion for their subject, useful and interesting knowledge being provided, and most

commonly and most powerfully, students being challenged. In fact, the most commonly

repeated theme as a positive for its presence or a negative for its absence was an

instructor challenging students intellectually.

When presenting less positive experiences, examples included behaviors contrary

to those just presented, plus examples of not feeling their experience as an adult learner

mattered either to the instructor or their peers, not being respected as an individual

(respect is discussed within the category of Importance of Relationships), and class

requirements they considered beneath their level. McGivney (2004) states that mature

students may feel alienated when their existing skills and experiences are not taken into

account or when their outside commitments are ignored, an atmosphere that can lead to

resentment and early withdrawal.

These examples included properties outside the category Feelings of Fit, a fact

that illustrates that while the category is a legitimate stand alone category along the lines

of its subcategories and properties, other categories, in fact all three other categories can

influence students' feelings of fit. Another property within this category that relates well

with common purpose mentioned earlier is *socialization,* with many participants speaking

of being motivated by having a sense of a common purpose with others working toward

the same or similar goals, a phenomenon that often led to greater socialization both

within and outside the classroom. They also spoke positively to socialization with the

instructor outside the class, but primarily referred to that as a positive when commenting

on the instructor's availability outside the classroom hours.

Challenges Encountered

This category was used as an example of developing a category in Chapter Three

so will not be addressed as in-depth here. This category has the fewest properties and no

subcategories but that has no bearing on its strength as one of the four categories. In fact,

analysis shows the properties associated with Challenges related to phenomenon very

important to the participants as evidenced by many participants' strong comments.

In examining the interrelation between the properties identified for the categories

of Importance of Relationships, Feelings of Fit, Assessment of Value and Challenges

Encountered, and the properties for a core category of Expectations, there seemed to be a

disconnect with Challenges. The properties, *competing priorities, competing*

commitments, sacrifice, time, roadblocks, disappointment, scheduling, selfishness,

conflicting responsibilities, frustration and *hoop jumping* are certainly not part of

students' positive expectations, however, they are still attributes participants identified as

part of college experiences. While participants made clear they worry about and try to

avoid such experiences, they are not entirely unexpected. In fact several participants

indicated challenges were expected, with one calling them "just part of the package, and

one of the downsides of the hill" (18-19), and another saying, "all that kind of stuff can

be tedious, but it's nothing outside the norm" (26-27) This suggests that perhaps

challenges only become a problem when they exceed students' expectations. Conversely, their absence or presence at a lower level than expected can be seen as a positive, as expressed by Raylie who described easy navigation of the college's business processes as phenomenal, stating, "that for me has just been a huge celebration because it wasn't my experience anywhere else" (25-26).

As stated in discussing Value, non-completed students in this study assessed at some level that the value of their college experiences was not high enough to support persistence. That is not to say any consciously made the decision to depart based on any such equation, but that it had a role in the ultimate decision. Analysis further suggests that for all five of them, their perceptions of their college experiences were influenced by one or more challenges encountered as adult students. The participants might not identify their reasoning as based on a challenge, but the analysis of their stories clearly supports the assertion.

Participant after participant spoke to the commonly understood challenges of *competing priorities, competing commitments, conflicting responsibilities, and time challenges* as they had encountered them as part of their college experiences. To distinguish between the three terms is essentially a matter of scale. Competing priorities imply a choice in the matter, such as Linda's angst regarding her decision to miss some of her son's sporting events so she could attend classes. Competing commitments imply less choice and flexibility such as participants who do volunteer work where if they miss those commitments others have to step in to fill the void or the people who are being helped suffer. Participants with conflicting responsibilities represent the highest degree of challenge, implying no real flexibility or alternatives. If the colleges have no means of

alleviating the conflict and the conflict is long term then involuntary departure may result. Such situations would be outside the scope of this study since I am looking only at voluntary departure. Terry, Becky, and Barb each indicated they saw their situations as offering no palatable alternatives so each decided to depart, but the data suggest that in each case there were other factors in play and potential alternative actions.

In looking at other properties of challenge, there is *sacrifice, disappointment,* and *frustration,* all commonly reported challenges. Participants' comments reflect their view of the phenomena, with the dimensional range for sacrifice being from "great sacrifice" to "minor inconvenience," for disappointment it is "why (should I) bother" to "soon forgotten," and for frustration, "can't stand it" to "oh well." The literature did not specifically use the terms disappointment and frustration, however, McGivney (2004) wrote about dissatisfaction, a likely byproduct of the two, calling dissatisfaction with a course or institution a common reason for adult non-completion. She stressed that if dissatisfaction is in addition to external constraints and pressures (other challenges), there is a strong likelihood that students will abandon a program.

Every interview revealed elements of sacrifice, but just as the dimensions show, the range can run from minor inconvenience, as most of the examples presented, to great sacrifice. It can be argued that every class attended involves some sacrifice, again running from "minor inconvenience" to "great sacrifice." Some might think that students who decide to depart did not sacrifice as much as those who persist, but looking only at Terry and Becky's stories, one can argue that their sacrifice was great in that as they perceived it, they put others' needs before their own, essentially sacrificing their academic goals to avoid asking the students to sacrifice by their competing commitments.

The data may include the concept frustration more than any other, but again the dimension ranges from "can't stand it" to "oh well" and many of the examples cited were more of the "oh well" type but in some cases it played a bigger role. Even if frustrations are small, one should keep in mind Mike's comment that although frustrations and disappointments may be minor, the cumulative effect may impact some students.

Matt, ever the optimist who says nothing can stop him from the pursuit of learning that he so loves commented on *disappointment,* "I had one disappointing class here and it was, it was absolutely required…it was more of a waste of time than anything else, it was and like I say disappointing, it didn't affect anything, but it was just so disappointing" (208-210).   Linda spoke to *frustration,* using that term directly in describing a situation where she felt the instructor was not engaged, not concerned about making sure the students learned the material. She put this sort of challenge at the top of her list, "The biggest frustration is in the classroom experience because…I have had some teachers…that I just think, if I can work this hard so can you" (114-116).

Take the examples from Matt and Linda, both very enthusiastic students and in facts ones I call enthusiasts in the next section regarding student types. Matt clearly loves learning and Linda considers herself very lucky to be on what she calls a great journey, but both express frustration and disappointment in the very areas they love the most in their college experiences, the classroom. Clearly they expect more, and in fact perhaps because of their enthusiasm for learning their expectations are higher than others, and therefore their emotions when expectations are not met, potentially stronger.

Turning to other properties, *scheduling* can be a challenge for students with data suggesting problems when students do not have full understanding of the order some

classes must be taken in, or as addressed in Focus Group 2, when colleges make changes

to degree programs that potentially change requirements. The dimensions here range

from "no moment to spare" to "less free time" but in actuality, program changes can also

result in extended time to graduation and as a result, new frustrations and

disappointments.   *Selfishness* can refer to any party, from the student feeling selfish for

the time they spend related to college, or perhaps to the perceived selfishness of

instructors who do not dedicate themselves to helping the students learn. With

selfishness not really having much of a positive side the dimension runs from "singular

focus" to "self-protective."

Individual Perspectives on the Categories

The categories were developed from the representative whole of the participants

and as such they are an abstract representation of the bits of data coming from the

participants. That practice is what gives the process its strength as grounded theory

research. That said, it is still interesting to look at how certain aspects of a particular

category can be seen in the individual stories of the participants. To that end I offer one

participant specific example for each of the categories.

Importance of relationships. Robin spoke to a non-relationship, relationship:

The school will assign you an advisor if you don't already know one, and I found

that difficult because I don't know anybody…. I have an advisor that I was

assigned to, but not really one that sought me out, or I sought them out, you know

what I'm saying? It's been an arranged marriage [laughter] in that sense I feel

like I'm not quite part of the game yet. (301-336).

Feelings of fit. Mike commented on his own experiences of not feeling he fit:

This school is so large that at times I feel like I don't fit…. As someone who is

going to school part-time, I think this school would fit for the fulltime person, but

for the part time person I think it's a bit overwhelming. (20-24)

Assessment of value. Becky addressed her assessment of one aspect of value:

There were some classes, that, and I don't want to be specific, but there were

some classes that I went to that I didn't think that the instructors were, necessarily

dedicated to our learning…. So I kind of felt a little bit short changed. (172-179)

Challenges encountered. Linda spoke to the challenge of competing priorities:

I mean the biggest drawback to all of this is just time. Even though I still have

one son, when he started high school I started back here so I missed some of his

hockey games like that, so there's the choice where I'm not really where I'm

supposed to be, I should be doing that but I'm really here. (204-207)

As these individual examples demonstrate, each category provides experiences

that make a difference in students' perceptions. The findings show students' perceptions

of their experiences, whether positive or negative, can influence their decisions on

persistence. It is reasonable that if students perceive experiences as negative, then those

experiences can influence students towards departure. The natural question that arises is

then, how negative must the experience be to influence such decisions, and the answer is,

"it depends" and I find it implausible that any research can provide a viable scale.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed discussion of this study's findings, first asserting

that the analysis fully supported that indeed college experiences, as perceived by adult

students, influence their decisions related to persistence, providing as evidence, the fact

that 21 of this study's 26 participants had either already departed a college program,

seriously considered leaving one, or at least issued an if/then statement suggesting that if

a bad situation continued they would depart.

Another important finding was that as participants engage in their various college

experiences, they tended to informally assess the experiences, essentially assigning some

fashion of a positive, negative or neutral assessment to the experience. This is especially

important when considering that these assessments can then play a role in students'

decisions on persistence. I refer to this as the ongoing persistence/departure equation.

The majority of this chapter was dedicated to describing the four major categories

of college experiences identified by the participants as most influential to them. In

detailing the development of the categories: Importance of Relationships, Assessment of

Value, Feelings of Fit, and Challenges Encountered, I also provided the subcategories,

properties and dimensions for each. In providing details of the findings, I described each

of the categories, complete with the subcategories and properties, and provided an

overview of many of the dimensions of those properties.

Chapter Five explains the significance of finding a central category that has strong

relationships to the four major categories and serves as the building blocks for theory. It

will also reveal the resulting theory and explain how it combines all the other data to

respond to the research questions.

CHAPTER FIVE

BUILDING THEORY

Using the data to identify the four major categories of phenomena participants considered most important in their college experiences provided very useful findings, but these findings did not fully satisfy the goals of this study. To move toward truly understanding of how college experiences, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions on persistence, one must develop a theoretical scheme. Getting there calls for the use of selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to first identify the central category.

This chapter takes the four major categories discussed in the findings as outlined in Chapter Four and takes the grounded theory methodology to the critical level of building theory. After explaining the use of selective coding to identify the vital central category, I then describe the processes used to evaluate this newly found category from the application of Strauss' (1987) criteria for selecting a central category, and Miles and Huberman's (1994) tactics for testing and confirming findings, to demonstrating the presence of the central category in the data. Next, I describe the process used to identify the central scheme and eventually the building of theory.

Before closing out this chapter with an explanation of how the major categories described in Chapter Four were combined with the central category to construct the theoretical scheme and actual theory that responds to the research questions, I provide literary support for the vital role of the central category in influencing students' decisions on persistence. This information was discovered only after completing the analysis and in addition to supporting this study's findings, it reinforces its importance in expanding the current knowledge base.

As explained in Chapter Three, I considered this research to be a basic qualitative study using grounded theory methods. I did not call it grounded theory research because to that point, nothing in the data or my pilot study had suggested a central category that could evolve into theory. In fact as the research progressed I considered this study might just resolve to three or four categories to explain the phenomena. Still, confident that the four major categories were at least part of the answer, I moved forward with selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Selective Coding

Grounded theory uses open and axial coding to develop major categories, but it is not until these categories are linked to form a larger theoretical scheme that the findings take the form of theory, and this is accomplished through selective coding. This process is intended to unify the major categories around a central category, and as Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain, the first step in the process is to decide on a central category to pull the others together to form an explanatory whole. The central category can evolve from the existing categories or elsewhere from the data, and in this study it actually came from the existing categories, but interestingly, it was from the one that was set aside during earlier category reduction, Expectations.

To explain this, when reducing from 24 potential categories to a more manageable number, I reduced the number to five, then named: Relationships, Expectations, Value, Fit, and Challenges. In fact, Expectations was an in vivo code, having been named by several participants, but in the final reduction it was set aside. I did this, not because it was deemed unimportant but because as concepts involving expectations were sorted, I added them under one of the other headings to which it was related. By example,

expectations of rigor in a class was added under Assessments of Value, and expectations

that instructors be caring towards students was added under Importance of Relationships.

In the end all concepts were neatly grouped under the four categories whose names were

then modified to more accurately represent them: Importance of Relationships,

Assessments of Value, Feelings of Fit, and Challenges Encountered.   Without

progressing to selective coding, I might never have rediscovered what turned out to be

the central category.

Writing the storyline, verbally. Confident I had identified the four major

categories I decided to employ a technique Strauss and Corbin (1998) call writing the

storyline; a technique designed to help researchers when faced with the challenge of

articulating what the research is all about. As Strauss and Corbin explain, this involves

researchers using descriptive sentences to address "what seems to be going on here" (p.

148). When satisfied they have a grasp of the essence of the research, researchers then

name the central idea and relate other concepts to it to form a theoretical scheme. I used

this technique with a twist, instead of physically writing the storyline, I spoke it, a

technique I had used throughout my analysis.

At various points during this process when I felt I had discovered something

important in the analysis, I would ask my wife to listen to me tell the story of the

research. This was not simply her sitting passively as I told little bits of the story,

because each time I would begin from the start of the analysis and explain each step,

asking she stop me if anything was unclear. She usually had little chance to interrupt as I

would frequently stop myself to clarify a point, also making written or recorded memos

as an idea or hunch emerged. In this particular instance I explained that I was going to

detail the development of the four categories and in so doing was looking to identify a

central category that could bring them all together.

During this verbal story writing it occurred to me I was not properly focusing on

the most important part of the research question, the "as perceived by" part of "How do

college experiences, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions regarding

persistence?" This led me to tell more of the story, going back over the reduction of the

potential categories from 24 to five and then to four, and as I explained how I made the

final reduction by setting aside the category of Expectations, I finally realized *what*

seemed to be going on here, and that was that students' expectations were influencing

their perceptions of their actual experiences. This also led to the identification of the

central category, *Expectations,* or more inclusively, *Expectations Influence Experiences*

Turning again to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) guidance I began to move from

description to conceptualization; naming the central category, Students' Expectations,

with a broader statement of the category as, Students' Expectations Influence College

Experiences and relating the other concepts to it. It should be noted that even at this

preliminary stage I realized the concept was more complex, in that the category could be

stated in at least three ways: (a) as currently named, Students' Expectations Influence

College Experiences, (b) pointing to a more specific aspect as Students' Expectations

Influence Students' Perceptions of College Experiences, and (c) toward the potential end

result as, Students' Expectations Influence College Persistence. I resolved this at least

temporarily by approaching the central category in its most simple term of, Students'

Expectations, leaving the more complex issues for resolution in developing the theory.

Returning to the development of the central category, I again asked my wife to listen as I verbalized the storyline, integrating the four categories and their properties. In addressing the Importance of Relationships I related that in describing *relationships with instructors* as either positive or negative, participants did so based on their expectations of what constitutes *dedication, love of teaching, passion, understanding, authenticity, commitment, caring,* and many if not all of the other properties of the category. The role of students' expectation was made clear in the data by participants' comments such as Matt's when talking about the close relationships he had with instructors stating, "I've sort of taken for granted that's the way it's supposed to be" (61-62).

In addressing Assessment of Value, I explained that for students to assess a class as having a positive or negative value, they must base that on their expectation of the phenomena (properties) they identify as mattering to value such as *class management, collaboration, constructive feedback, level of learning, rigor, usefulness,* and again many if not all of the other properties they identified under the category. Following the same line of reasoning was easy for properties under the category of Feelings of Fit, but in addressing Challenges Encountered, a slightly different approach was required as its properties did not flow so easily from expectation to influence on the experience.

With the categories Importance of Relationships, Assessment of Value, and Feelings of Fit, one can explain that students' expectations of the experience influenced their feelings towards their lived experience, but with the properties of Challenges Encountered, students may have entered into the college experience with no informed expectation of what the *roadblocks* they might face would be, or how the college experience might create phenomena of *conflicting responsibilities* or *competing*

priorities. They may have been surprised that some challenges made them feel they were having to *jump through hoops* or made them feel *selfish* for needing to spend *time* on homework versus being with others. In the other categories students' expectations can clearly influence their perceptions of experiences, whereas with Challenges Encountered it is more of an understanding of and preparation for the challenges that may influence students' perceptions of the experience. This point illustrates the importance of colleges discussing students' expectations to help prepare the students for these challenges, before they face them and perhaps decide the cost is too high.

At this point I employed member checking by sending an email (Appendix E) to all participants, explaining my analysis identified four categories of phenomenon as mattering most in their college experiences: Importance of Relationships, Assessment of Value, Feelings of Fit, and Challenges Encountered. I further explained I was now assessing Students' Expectations as the central category, and asked each to respond and let me know if they felt their expectations influenced their experiences in any area. Their responses supported Students' Expectations as the central category, and Shannon's in particular illustrated how an increased knowledge of potential challenges can influence expectations. Shannon stated, "My main concern was time. So far this has worked just fine. I have had to make a few adjustments in my schedule, *but I was prepared to do that* [emphasis added]" (Shannon, personal communication, May 6, 2011). Shannon's statement that things have worked out fine despite a *scheduling* challenge, a property under Challenges Encountered, because she was prepared to do that was significant. She was prepared because her expectations were in line with the potential challenge, and that made the challenge manageable.

Comparing the Category Against the Criteria

With this conceptualization in hand, I decided to test the power of Students'

Expectations as a central category to pull the other categories together to form an

explanatory whole (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To do this I used Strauss' (1987) six

criteria for choosing a central category:

1. It must be central; that is, all other major categories can be related to it.

2. It must appear frequently in the data. This means that within all or almost all

   cases, there are indicators pointing to that concept.

3. The explanation that evolves by relating the categories is logical and consistent.

   There is no forcing of the data.

4. The name or phrase used to describe the central category should be sufficiently

   abstract that it can be used to do research in other substantive areas, leading to

   the development of a more general theory.

5. As the concept is refined analytically through the integration with other

   concepts, the theory grows in depth and explanatory power.

6. The concept is able to explain variations as well as the main point made by the

   data; that is, when conditions vary, the explanation still holds, although the way

   in which a phenomenon is expressed might look somewhat different. One also

   should be able to explain contradictory or alternative cases in terms of that

   central idea (p. 36).

In my then cautious opinion, *Students' Expectations* met Strauss' (1987) criteria

recommended of a central category. The first criterion stated the category must be

central, with all other categories able to be related to it. This one was pretty basic as

commented on in the memo dated 5-2.   In discussing the centrality of Expectations in the data, my methodology advisor asked about the absence of Expectations as one of the final categories, noting that it had been one of the final five, but in one more integration process it had disappeared.

The explanation helps illustrate how the other categories can be related to Expectations and addressed the second criterion that the category must appear frequently in the data. From the earliest open coding participants were presenting data on expectations, and in those early stages I did note expectations as a concept many times, however, in comparing the comments between interviews and starting to combine concepts under the more abstract potential category headings, I moved from merely noting the expectations and instead made notations on what the expectations were about.

Two examples include Kathy's strong statement about a class, "I hated the class…. First of all [because] it wasn't the content that I was expecting" (368-371), and Linda's comment on the competitiveness she encountered, "I just finished my masters in May and it's been more competitive at the doctoral level than I expected it to be" (58-59). In Kathy's example I noted the central idea as one of content, a property under Value, and likely noted enjoyment (referring to the lack of) which at the time did not have a category but now is a property of Feelings of Fit. With Linda's comment I noted it as concepts (now properties) of common purpose and enjoyment, one under Assessment of Value and the other again under Feelings of Fit. So, I coded them fine, but I did not code them as expectations and in fact they certainly represent just that.

There are many more examples in the data where I either coded something to include a note on expectation and later dropped that property when reducing, or I failed to

notice at the time and did not list it at all. Enough codings on expectations made it

through the analysis to where my first significant reduction to five categories included it

as its own category, but in the table top, single piece of paper for each concept without

the comments right there, I lost sight of its role, but only temporarily.

In addressing the third criterion that the explanation that evolves by relating the

categories is logical and consistent so there is no forcing of the data is a criteria I set for

myself from the start. The four categories, Importance of Relationships, Feelings of Fit,

Assessment of Value and Challenges Encountered, all involve Expectations. One cannot

assess any of these without some level of expectation. The fourth criterion, calling for

the name or phrase to be sufficiently abstract that it can be used to do research in other

areas and lead to the development of more general theory sounds intimidating, but it

works with Expectations. A simple statement such as Expectations influence perceptions

is certainly abstract and can be taken completely outside the realm of education and it

will still apply.

Criterion five calls for the theory to grow in depth and explanatory power as it is

integrated with other concepts. Although this central category has its own strength, it is

through this integration that the real explanatory power comes forth. This was especially

true as when looking back to Expectations as its own category in earlier stages of the

analysis, it had a strong list of properties and dimensions, but when integrated with the

other categories to form the central category and eventually the theory that encapsulates

this study, it all comes together.

And finally, criterion six says the concept must be able to explain variations as

well as the main point made by the data, and that one should be able to explain

contradictory or alternative cases in terms of the central category. Again it meets that

test, as I would consider William as a somewhat contradictory case, in that he has some

of the most clear expectations: respect, rigorous classes, and engaged peers. His

expectation for respect has been exceeded, as he is delighted to have a high level advisor

who he sees as understanding him, but many of his classroom experiences do not meet

his expectations, as he states, "I've learned things, I just haven't liked the way I learned

them." (175-176). Still, William is adamant he will complete his program, and that

appears to be because he has a need for the degree to get where he wants to go, and

frankly it seems he accepts that many classes just cannot meet his expectations. In other

words, he accepts, and almost anticipates, that his experiences will not match his

expectations. My research shows that an expanded title of Students' Expectations

Influence Persistence, as a central category does just what Strauss and Corbin (1998) say

it should do, it explains what is going on.

With the central category speaking rather broadly to the issue of how students'

expectations influence college persistence, I look again at one of the alternative ways of

representing the category. Alternative (b) on page 169 offered: Students' Expectations

Influence Students' Perceptions of College Experiences. The perceptions piece has been

pushed back a bit to allow for the influence of expectations on those perceptions, and

instructors, advisors, peers and staff have been added to the equation. Still, the role of

perceptions in this phenomenon should not be overlooked.

The Role of Expectations in Perceptions

In *Cognitive Psychology*, Best (1999) points out that as important as sensory

information such as sight, touch, smell and feel are to perception, it cannot be the whole

story. He gives the example of looking at a car in a parking lot on a bright, sunny day

with all the light reflecting off of it, and how he can recognize it as a car, but on a foggy

day, or at night, he still recognizes the patterns as a car. This capability is based on the

fact that in addition to sensory information he also uses, as Best states, his "knowledge of

the world to make inferences about the sensory information I can expect to encounter" (p.

42). Now Best had no idea about this study, but in his last five words, "I can expect to

encounter" he captured an point important to this study, the link between expectations

and perceptions.

In addressing the role of perception in problem solving, Anderson (1981, as cited

in Best, 1999) asserts that people have a tendency to perceive events and objects in a way

our prior experiences have led us to expect. Best goes so far as to suggest that means our

perceptions are somewhat predetermined. While Anderson and Best refer to experience

as influencing our expectations, they continue with the aspect most pertinent to this

study, that our expectations influence and perhaps even predetermine our perceptions.

This study does not explore what shapes students' expectations, but if indeed the link

between expectations and perceptions is this strong, this reinforces the need for open

discussion of expectations.

In further considering the role of perceptions in exploring this phenomenon,

several well-known quotes come to mind, "perception is reality" although this quote is

non-attributed, literature suggests it stems from Albert Einstein's "Reality is merely an

illusion, albeit a very persistent one." That seems an appropriate quote in a study related

to persistence. One final quote that has play here is Anais Nin's *"*We don't see things as

they are, we see things as we are." The point to each of these is in the difference between

the experience as it is planned, intended, or perhaps even occurred to some, as compared with the experience as it was perceived by any given student. Colleges must deal with students' perceptions of their experiences, not just the experiences itself. It must be noted that the question no longer asks just about students' perceptions because just as illustrated in some of the quotes above, expectations can play a significant role in how experiences are perceived.

As examples from the data have shown there is definite interplay between expectations and perceptions. The research suggests that students' expectations are at the heart of students' perceptions, in that if students' expectations, realistic or not, are met or exceeded in their college experiences, it is reasonable to expect those students will then perceive their experiences as positive. Conversely, if their expectations, again realistic or not, are not met in their college experiences, it is reasonable to expect they will perceive their experiences as negative.

In responding to the logical question of what degree of influence do expectations have in influencing students' perceptions, I can only offer "it depends." Data suggest the influence is related to how great the discord between students' expectations and their perception of the lived experience, but as with properties and their dimensions, the discord can have more than one dimension, taking into account not just level or discord but also an assessment of the importance students' assign the issue.

Terry's case as a non-completed student provides multiple examples of discord in which the level of discord with was high, as was the importance of the phenomenon. In talking about a course she saw as taking far more time than she expected it would she stated, "That was a huge stumbling (block), that was huge" (630), and in discussing what

she saw as a requirement to put own needs ahead of others, she commented, "I'd never be able to do it" (353). On the other hand, in looking at perhaps a low level of discord and obviously a phenomenon of low importance, Matt, a current ABD student talking about a parking problem stated, "I'm not going to worry about the parking I'm not going to worry about anything really except for the academic experience and it's a great one because I'm in a place where I'm very happy" (66-68).

One of the properties under the category of Assessment of Value is rigor, and students' expectations of rigor in the classroom could include a simple dimensional range of easy to hard, but there is another aspect related to the expectation; how important is the expectation of rigor to the student? Go back to the two students in the same classroom example, both Student A and Student B may expect rigor in the class, but it is unlikely they will have the exact same placement on the dimensional range, a variance that is already differentiating their experiences. Now suppose that to Student A, a class that isn't intellectually challenging so that it pushes his limits, is not a class worth taking, but to Student B, she just wants it to make her think and maybe have to do a bit of research and write a short paper. This illustrates why experiences are almost never the same and expectations play such a major role in students' perceptions.

This discussion brings up the central theme of this study; that it is not merely a question of how adult students' perceptions of their college experiences influence their decisions on persistence, but rather how the *harmony* or *discord* between adult students' expectations and their perceptions of their college experiences influence their decisions on persistence. As used in this study the concepts are simple, *expectations harmony* results when students' expectations and experiences are in line, and *expectations discord*

results when they are in conflict, in other words, harmony is considered positive and discord, negative.

It is important to note that expectations discord is not just another term for unmet expectations, as while unmet expectations may imply clear expectations or standards, the phenomenon of expectations discord may first reveal itself just as a feeling or a thought that something in the event just does not seem to sit right with the person. For instance students may not immediately know why they feel as they do, much as is the case with the conditions referred to in Strauss & Corbin's (1998) paradigm which can influence perceptions without participant awareness. In fact, people may never apply the *expectations discord* label unless it is taken up as an intentional point of discussion.

The central category in the data. Criterion 2 called for the central category to appear frequently in the data and providing examples of this may also provide a better understanding of its influence. Not every participant used the word expectation, though several did, but all spoke to expectations in one form or another. Matt's comment on taking the close relationship for granted was given earlier, but the following examples from all the rest of the focus group members illustrates the point:

Mia: "It was so boring…I wouldn't even do that in high school" (204-205).

Raylie: "It's graduate school. I love it when they have high expectations" (362).

Rick: "He's a good teacher…but his classroom management was just absent" (355-356).

Rayleen: " I'm not an idiot, you're going to have to help me out here" (608-609).

Sienna: "At this stage of my life bad pedagogy really is much more irritating…. I really don't have the time to waste" (317-318).

Michele: 'This time everything matters and I want this…to be great!" (442-444).

Justin: "I always admired him…because I learned a lot" (691-692).

Shannon: "They're [the classroom desks] too much like elementary school,

they're not adult" (854).

Only one of the examples includes the word expectation, but I argue that each of them

includes a student's expectation. If Matt takes it for granted that is the way it is supposed

to be, he is expecting the phenomenon . For Mia to call the class boring implies an

expectation of more interesting delivery, and Michele's statement that everything matters

and she wants it to be great includes an expectation.

In one-on-one interviews, many statements on expectations were clear, with some

participants discussing their expectations of themselves, their instructors, advisors, staff,

or peers, while others addressed expectations their instructors or advisors had of them:

William: "I didn't expect to be treated as much of an individual as I've been"

(98) and "I'm a busy man, I got a job, I got a practice, I got a family, anything

you can do extra to help me get to that stuff is great, and I think that is just, that is

an expectation now all the college students have" (357-359).

Robin: "I was learning stuff I hadn't learned before, and it was just, it was just

wonderful, and I think because it exceeded my expectations too" (431-433).

Terry: "I think you could say that, some part of me said is that maybe I had

unrealistic expectations" (397-398).

Becky: "Because, my advisor, I think would expect a lot more…. He would

expect me to go out and do something much bigger than what I…have the time to

do (204-209).

Jenni: "We [students] expect what the college promises. That all their instructors

are actually bringing real world experiences into the classroom. That's one of

their reasons why you pick the schools that you do." (648-650).

Michele's and Jenni's examples provide capable illustrations that expectations,

unlike perhaps standards, do not necessarily have defined parameters. Most students do

not arrive at college with a checklist or grade sheet and begin marking off points until

hitting the magic number that says it is time to depart, but within all students there is the

ability to decide I will or I will not continue this effort. The point I struggle to make clear

is that expectations influence students' perceptions of their college experiences and

student's perceptions of their experiences influence their decisions on persistence. The

unknown of course, and I would argue, the unknowable is what exactly that "decision

point" is for various students. The data makes clear that the decision point is different for

different participants. It has also been clear in discussing the departure decision with the

five non-completed students in this study, that there does not really seem to be one, single

phenomenon at the root of the decision.

Whatever the balance factors are that lead to the decision point being reached is

beyond the scope of this research, however, this study has identified phenomena that

mattered to these participants, and has determined that the participants' expectations

influenced their perceptions of their experiences. I would argue it has also shown that

those perceptions have influenced participants' decisions on persistence or departure, an

assertion supported by the fact that 21 of the 26 participants reported departing a college

program, seriously considering departing, or issuing an if/then statement regarding the

potential to depart. The participants provided evidence these decisions were made based

at least in part on the participants' perceptions of their experiences, and the data has

shown these perceptions are routinely influenced by participants' expectations.

<div align="center">**Progressing to Theory**</div>

Remembering that the main reason to use grounded theory research is that it

provides the building blocks to build, from the data, a theoretical framework that can

explain the phenomena under investigation,, and having already addressed the theoretical

scheme, I moved to refining the scheme into developing actual theory to explain the

phenomenon under study, how college experiences, as perceived by adult students,

influences their decisions regarding persistence. First, Strauss and Corbin's (1998)

definition of theory:

> Theory denotes a set of well developed categories (e.g., themes, concepts) that are
>
> systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical
>
> framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational,
>
> nursing, or other phenomenon. The statements of relationship explain who, what,
>
> when, where, why, how, and with what consequences an event occurs. (p. 22)

The Theoretical Scheme

Taking a page from Strauss and Corbin (1998), I had conceptualized a statement

of the theoretical scheme: S*tudent's expectations influence their perceptions of college*

experiences. Returning to the complexity of this central category discussed on page 169,

reveals this theoretical scheme accounts for two of the three ways listed to represent the

central category, the three were: (a) Students' Expectations Influence College

Experiences, (b) Students' Expectations Influence Students' Perceptions of College

Experiences, and (c) Students' Expectations Influence College Persistence. The

theoretical scheme above accounted for (a) and (b), so the critical missing piece that was needed to complete the scheme was (c) which addresses the end result influence on persistence.

In addition to responding to the research questions, this theoretical scheme can explain why students perceive their experiences differently, differences that can lead to students' varying decisions on persistence – their individual expectations influence their perceptions of their college experiences. Ray's case as a non-completer, provides an excellent illustration of this progression from expectation to perception to departure.

Ray was the youngest participant in this study, actually five years younger than the intended age range for this study, but nothing in his case suggests his relative youth was a factor in his decision to depart; a decision he made reluctantly, stating he felt kind of foolish leaving a free doctoral program. Ray first stated he left the program because the time challenge was too great, but in further discussion he related that his experiences in the classroom environment and what he considered a lack of support in the scheduling of the class played a role in his departure decision. Both issues were influenced by his expectations which influenced his perceptions of the experience, which influenced his persistence/departure equation, leading to his decision to depart.

Ray *expected* he could attend college just one night a week and still take two classes as the traditional class hours supported that with one starting late afternoon, followed immediately by another early evening. In starting classes he learned that the instructor has scheduled this one, mandatory class period where it actually took place across portions of both of the traditional time slots. He admitted the non-traditional scheduling was an irritant and a challenge, and when the issue was raised, the instructor

put the question of moving the class to a traditional time slot to a popular vote and the

majority voted it down.

This scenario illustrates two examples of expectations discord, first Ray expected

the class to be in traditional time slot, and then he expected support from his instructor

and peers. Both expectations met with unexpected results; expectations discord, resulting

in a more negative perception. Ray's second influencer was his disappointment in the

class itself, as he did not feel he was learning anything useful and did not feel he fit in

with his peers. The class discussions were more of brag sessions than knowledge related,

and as he put it, "that's just not the person I am" (53).

The data clearly show that the discord between Ray's expectations and his

perception of his lived experiences resulted in the loss of another adult student. This loss

was potentially avoidable, as when asked if he would have stayed if either expectation;

taking two classes, or learning from the one, would have been met he responded, "I bet I

would've, yeah" (206).

The only aspect of the theory unexplained at this point is one aspect of the "how"

of the research question, "How do college experiences, as perceived by adult students,

influence their decisions regarding persistence?" The theory explains that students'

expectations influence their perceptions of their college experiences, and those

perceptions can then influence their decisions on persistence, so the unexplained how is,

how do the perceptions influence their decisions on persistence? That piece is known,

however, as it was addressed in the section Assessing the Experience under Findings in

Chapter Four. In brief, as students engage in an event, action or interaction (experience)

they compare the experience to their expectations of it and at least informally then assess

the experience in some fashion as positive, negative or neutral. This assessment forms

the students' perception of the experience and that perception can then influence

students' ongoing persistence/departure equation (also addressed in Chapter Four).

Integrating all aspects of this theory results in a rather unwieldy combination of

phrases, essentially stated as: Adult students' individual expectations of college

experiences influence their assessments of the experiences as positive negative or neutral.

These assessments influence students' perceptions of the experiences. The students'

perceptions of the experiences then influence their informal assessment of their overall

college experience. This overall assessment of students' college experiences influences

students' ongoing persistence/departure equation. And at some undetermined point, this

equation can result in students' decisions to depart.

Presenting the Theory

After combining all aspects of the theory constructed from this study's data, the

following statement of the theory is presented: *Adult students' expectations of their*

college experiences influence their perceptions and assessment of the actual experiences,

thereby influencing their decisions to persist in or depart college. Despite the relative

simplicity of the theory, it serves as an explanation of the phenomenon and identifies the

critical concepts detailed in this study, students' expectations, perceptions, and decisions

on persistence.

This newly developed theory seeks to include how all of the categories relate to

the overall assessment of students' college experiences. In example, the theory accounts

for how students' expectations of their relationships with instructors, advisors, peers, and

the overall college influence their perceptions of those relationship experiences and how

those perceptions then influence their overall assessment of their college experiences. It

includes how students' expectations of the value of different experiences influences their

perceptions of those experiences; how their expectations of feeling they fit in their

various assessment of the value of their experiences is influenced by their expectations of

the value of those experiences. Continuing the point, students' expectations of the

challenges they encounter will also influence their perceptions of those challenges.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) state that central categories must be able to account for

all other categories, and Students' Expectations does that. Take the Importance of

Relationships and its subcategories, all of its properties and their dimensions. They all

lose their significance without an understanding of expectations. The same is true for the

other categories, Feelings of Fit, Assessment of Value, and Challenges Encountered. All

six criteria for choosing a central category (Strauss, 1987) are satisfied in Expectations,

even the sixth criteria that requires central categories to explain variation.

Looking at the data shows that sometimes perceptions of experiences as negative

does not influence students' decisions on persistence. Expectations can account for this

as discussed above, that the level of discord which can be related to the importance the

students' attach to their expectation of the experience. The value of Students'

Expectations as a central category is not in its ability to predict what particular

phenomenon will so influence students' decisions on persistence. Rather the value is in

its role to help all parties; students, instructors, advisors, staff, and peers better

understand what matters to each, and why it matters.

As an example, the category Importance of Relationships, its subcategory of

student/instructor relationships, and the property of support, with its dimensional range of

"on an island" to "you matter to me." Among the several students in a class it is likely

that they could be plotted all along that range, not only for where they perceived they

were on the scale, but also for where they wanted to be. Students who just want to take

the class, get the grade and move on are likely to have expectations of the relationship

that satisfy that preference. However, students like Matt who find the relationships very

important will plot higher on the scale towards "you matter to me." An instructor

satisfying the lower end of the dimensional range is unlikely to satisfy Matt's

expectations, and this can lead to expectations discord, and that discord can have a

downward spiraling affect on all aspects of that student and instructor relationship.

Testing and confirming findings. Just as open and axial coding is not

sequential, neither are all the aspects of this report. I did not wait until the very end of

constructing the theory to employ Miles and Huberman's (1994) tactics for testing and

confirming findings, as I used aspects of this on and off throughout my analysis. I did,

however, return to these tactics when I felt more confident in my central category and

theory. The results from this effort added to my confidence in this study's validity.

1. Checking for representativeness. Every category, subcategory, property and
   dimension was verified to ensure it is representative of the whole participant
   group. That is not to say that every participant echoed each concept, but that
   no concepts are representative of just a few.

2. Checking for researcher effects. I was worried about this at the outset, but as
   the interviews progressed and I spoke less and less, I felt better. Also, my
   review of the transcripts verified that I was very conscientious in ensuring my

own story did not interfere with hearing theirs, and in checking to ensure

effective translation of the story (not putting my spin on their words).

3. Triangulating. I used three types of triangulation. The first being the use of

focus groups at the two primary schools coupled with one-on-one interviews

with participants from both schools, so the triangulation was, Focus Group A

in December 2010, Focus Group B in February 2011, and individual interviews

during the December 2010 to April 2011 time frame. I also used member, peer

and instructor checking to review my open and axial coding efforts. And

finally, I relied heavily on researcher reflexivity, reflecting frequently on my

own potential bias as a researcher and adult student. To make this fit the

triangulation effort, I made my role clear in every interview and to my

committee so they could help me be alert for any signs of researcher effect.

4. Weighting the evidence. Although I knew my analysis needed to be

constructed from all the data, I still paid attention to who provided what, partly

because certain data can have increased significance based on its source or the

circumstances surrounding it, and secondly to be able to go back and seek

clarification if necessary.

5. Checking the meaning of outliers. This study definitely had divergent views

presented, as illustrated in the first focus group interview, one participant

essentially tried to explain away any negative experience others commented

on, but aside from one participant who seemed particularly angry with the

educational system, there were no other outliers identified. Even in the one

case, valuable information was provided as related to students' expectations.

6. Using extreme cases. The closest thing to an extreme case in this study would
   be the Enthusiast type of student, but again, in this study the Enthusiasts
   offered valuable information on both the positive and negative side of
   experiences.

7. Following up surprises. I was definitely surprised by two events in this study.
   The first was Karen's progression from her opening statement making clear
   that her every experience had been super to exclaiming that she hated one type
   of class management and that if other classes were that way she would leave,
   and by the development of Students' Expectations as the central category. I
   followed up with both and am confident each was properly documented and
   considered.

8. Looking for negative evidence. I did this with every category development and
   extensively with my theoretical statements regarding the role of expectations
   harmony and discord. The only thing close to a negative is the fact that some
   students may feel a great deal of expectations discord and still not choose to
   depart; an occurrence I believe is related to other factors keeping the student in
   college, not a challenge to the theory.

9. Making "if-then" tests. I used these tests from day one of the data collection
   and continued using them throughout this study, in fact using them in my
   explanation of the findings.

10. Ruling out spurious relations. Despite ruling out such relations, there are
    potentially many variables that can be in play in students' perceptions of their
    experiences that I cannot possibly rule them all out. However, I am not

presenting expectations harmony or discord as a causal event, rather as a contributory one. Expectations discord will likely influence students' perceptions of their college experiences, and perceptions of negative experiences can influence students' decisions on persistence. Nonetheless, the expectations discord does not necessarily cause student departure.

11. Replicating a finding. After determining that students' expectations influenced perceptions of college experiences, I reached out to the participants, explaining my findings and asking for input on their own experiences. Several replied affirmatively, thereby supporting the finding.

12. Checking out rival explanations. This tactic would have revealed my previous potential central categories list as insufficient as I had considered "Cost versus Benefit" as a rival explanation, but further review determined that neither was possible without expectations as one cannot weigh the cost or benefit without an expectation of both.

13. Getting feedback from informants. The tactic I explained before about reaching out to the participants fits into this tactic. Additionally, as I have explained, I have worn out my wife's ear and perhaps her patience seeking her feedback on my theory, as well as the patience of anyone who hazards to ask about my research. Primarily though, I rely on my committee for this vital feedback.

With this final set of tests, and still no conflicts, and having long before reached theoretical saturation, I was satisfied I had properly chosen and developed the central category for this story. I think the linkage between Students' Expectations can be

presented in a modification of Kasworm's (1990) quote that I find very appropriate here.

Kasworm says "Adults do not live apart; rather, they are a part of their world" (p. 366) .

Trusting Dr. Kasworm will forgive me, I will offer that expectations do not live apart

from the central ideas in this data, rather, they are part of the collective whole.

Getting feedback from informants. Just as Miles and Huberman (1994)suggest

in their tactics for testing or confirming findings, I decided to reach out to the participants

of this study via email (Appendix E) to explain my findings to date, to ask their thoughts

on the link between expectations and experiences, and to seek any perspectives contrary

to my identified categories.

In addition to Shannon's response detailed earlier, nine participants responded

with comments ranging from just a short note to very detailed feedback on all areas, but

their responses referred to their own expectations in one of three areas: (a) harmony

between expectations and experiences, (b) discord between the two, and (c) a claim of

having no expectations due to no idea what to expect. Not surprisingly where there was

harmony the experiences were judged as positive, where there was discord, the

experiences were judged as negative, and where there were no (clear) expectations the

experiences have been a mix of positive and negative.

Comments on the harmony between expectations and experiences include

participants using terms like happy, pleased, appreciative, respected, balanced, and

belonging. In describing discord between the two, participants used terms such as, livid,

disappointed, surprised, pushed, disheartened, not valued, unprepared, frustrated and

mismatched. None of respondents offered opinions contrary to my summary of findings,

with most providing statements of support stating that they felt their story was accurately

reflected in the information I provided for their review.

Responding to the Research Questions

Admittedly pleased with the development of the four major categories as

described in Chapter Four and the other findings detailed there, and especially with the

identification of a central category and eventual construction of a theory to explain the

phenomenon, I turned once again to the research questions. Understanding that these

questions were the basis behind this study, I had used them more as a guide to ensure I

stayed on track with my research, rather than as a set of questions I had to answer to pass

a test. That said, it was reaffirming to look closely at these questions and determine that

indeed the data collection and analysis had presented a theory capable of responding to

the questions. Once again, these questions are:

- Primary question: How do college experiences, as perceived by adult students,

   influence their decisions regarding college persistence?

- Secondary questions: These questions relate to the main areas of student

   experiences:

  1. How do experiences with the college business processes, as perceived by

     adults students, influence their decisions regarding college persistence?

  2. How do experiences with the college support services, as perceived by adult

     students, influence their decisions regarding college persistence?

  3. How do experiences in interacting with faculty advisors, as perceived by adult

     students, influence their decisions regarding persistence?

4. How do experiences in the classroom environment, as perceived by adult

students, influence their decisions regarding college persistence?

5. How do feelings of fit, as perceived by adult students, influence their

decisions regarding college persistence?

The primary question. *How do college experiences, as perceived by adult*

students, influence their decisions related to persistence?

In finding an answer to this question, all data collection and data analysis has

worked together to provide very beneficial information key categories of phenomena that

matter to adult students, and provided excellent detail on the characteristics or attributes

of those categories, along with information on their dimensions as well. The detailed

answer to this question is on pages 184 and 185, as that breaks the theory into parts,

expectations influence perceptions, perceptions influence assessment, assessment

influences the persistence/departure equation, and the equation influences decisions, but a

simple statement of the theory provides a quality answer: *Adult students' expectations of*

their college experiences influence their perceptions and assessment of the actual

experiences, thereby influencing their decisions to persist in or depart college.

Data was collected and analyzed across the spectrum of students' experiences, but

interestingly the compilation of data showed that very few of the phenomena identified

were related to students' college experiences as related to college business process or

support services. This, along with comments the undergraduates made relating to their

status as 40 to 65 year old students suggests that for adult students coming to college later

in life, it is the experiences in the areas of Student/Advisor Interactions, the Classroom

Environment, and Feelings of Fit that matter most.

The secondary questions. In responding to the secondary research questions, the same answer based on the theory applies, just with the words specific to each secondary question appended. However, to provide a more detailed understanding of the individual areas, examples from the data are shared for each area.

1. How do experiences with the college business processes, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions regarding college persistence? The data did not suggest business processes were significant factors related to adult students decisions on persistence, with Raylie and William serving as exceptions. Raylie was adamant that she based her decision to depart her previous college because the various processes such as getting registered, securing student loans, and submitting various forms related to college attendance was taking too much of her time to figure out. By contrast she was very happy with her current college's business processes, considering them phenomenal and a great celebration by comparison. William's example was primarily along the lines of a lack of confidence in his previous college to stand by its commitments regarding his study plan.

Others from College A who talked about their experiences with the business processes primarily commented on how the processes such as on-line registration and payment had improved over the years, or if speaking about having to stand in lines to conduct some business, they indicated it was not a significant problem. It was obvious that none of the participants considered their current college's business processes would influence their decisions on persistence.

In commenting on a similar situation where the college changed the program when students were already enrolled, Focus Group B participants said they felt they had

been misled on the requirements. Interestingly this was brought up by a participant who had heard the story from two students about to graduate. The "grapevine" sharing of such a story demonstrates how damaging such experiences can be, whether factual or not.

      2. How do experiences with the college support services, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions regarding college persistence?   The majority of comments regarding experiences with support services were positive, with several participants speaking favorably about the friendly and helpful library staff, and a few commenting on the helpfulness of the writing laboratory. Overall, however, the data did not suggest much student use of the various support services on campus. It is possible these areas would be more of a player for traditional students as their importance was stressed in the Miller et al. (2005) project, or perhaps for adult students involved in undergraduate courses, but the three participants enrolled in or recently completing undergraduate degrees offered nothing more on these areas of interaction than the other 23 participants.

      A point of potential concern was a seeming general lack of awareness on the services available. Two of the non-completed students referred to significant academic challenges, with Barb attributing her decision to depart on her significant difficulties with grammar and writing, yet when I asked about her knowledge of the support services that could help her, she knew only a bit about such programs and had never visited the laboratory. Terry attributed one statistics class and the need to learn a new software program in support of the class, as the giant boulder placed in her path, and although she knew of support services, she had not contacted them regarding the class. Beyond Barb and Terry's example, there was very little said about support services.

When participants did comment on some of the services, in almost every instance the participant said they learned of the service from a fellow student, not from their instructor or advisor. As pointed out by Miller et al. (2005), without readily available information on services colleges offer, students have no way of knowing what to expect, an issue that can lead to disappointment potentially influencing their overall satisfaction.

3. How do experiences in interacting with faculty advisors, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions regarding persistence? Part of the answer to this question is pretty straight-forward in that students' perceptions of interactions with advisors as negative was influential in students' consideration of departing college without completing the college degree they were seeking. That of course leaves open the aspects of the influence of interactions with advisors that students assessed as positive and neutral, and that is a tough answer to provide.

In looking at experiences between students and their advisors, the data provides a wide range of examples from Barb, who despite departing college as an ABD student, considers her advisor with obvious great regard. Then we have another ABD student who also describes her relationship with her advisor as very close but she departed rather than completing her dissertation because she knew his expectations would be for her to perform in a manner far exceeding what she had time to do while continuing her work that was incredibly important to her. As far as the three other non-completed students, two had no advisors and one had an advisor she did not know well and who did not return emails from the student.

Looking at the research question, perhaps it should have included a parenthetical qualifier of, *if students have an advisor.* Despite the unfortunate examples cited, analysis includes very positive comments regarding close and beneficial student advisor relationships, but being close to an advisor does not necessarily equate to persistence. The data does, however, support that a close relationship or in terms used in this research, a feeling of fit with an advisor is better than one referred to as an arranged marriage where student and advisor just do not seem to understand each other.

4. How do experiences in the classroom environment, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions regarding college persistence? As with student/advisor interactions, the category Importance of Relationships is a fount of data in this area, and in fact every category informs on experiences in the classroom environment, though Importance of Relationships and Assessment of Value speak to it almost exclusively. Relationships inform classroom experiences with every one of its properties. Students speak to the critical importance of instructors being authentic in their approach, available during and after class, showing they care about the students, demonstrating they are committed to the success of every student, and dedicated to keeping the information fresh and useable.

The analysis shows through comments by all participants that students place great importance on learning, as comments make clear, they are in the class to learn, while other comments stress the importance of the classroom being a collaborative environment where students are encouraged to and in fact expected to be engaged, and when not, these students want their peers to be held accountable. It is clear based upon the analysis of the interviews that adult students want to be treated as the adults they are, but that does not

mean they want to be given a pass, in fact many make clear they are looking for rigor in the class, they want to have to stretch, they want to be challenged.

Adult students assess the value of their experiences in the classroom environment and they want efficiency in classroom management and are looking for a high level of learning, with relevant and useful content. In speaking of challenge, adult students also spoke to the challenges they face as classroom students, with many speaking of the competing commitments and priorities they face, and almost all commenting on the time challenges they face, and that is where the need for positive relationships is highlighted as they are seeking instructors who are able to be flexible and understanding as they deal with the challenges. Other challenges, however, they attribute to the classroom environment, from being frustrated and disappointed in instructors who are not prepared to what they call hoop jumping, referring to classrooms where the curricula is rigid and their capabilities are not considered.

A final comment that stood out in the data is the desire for classrooms that are arranged and equipped in ways that are conducive to adult learning. Here the students are referring to movable desks that are big enough for a full-sized person that also has the room to allow them to use a laptop or spread out class materials.

5. How do feelings of fit, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions regarding college persistence? In experiences related to Feelings of Fit, the findings provide valuable information, however, much of the answer was rolled into the questions on student/advisor interactions and classroom environment as illustrated in the comments on school desks. Experiences related to feelings of fit were important to the participants, and as mentioned earlier, back in 1926, Eduard Lindeman recognized that some aspects

of college might work against the perspectives and expectations of adult students. The

expectations of adult students likely present several challenges to colleges trying to make

them feel welcomed, because just because the students are adults, that does not mean that

everything they bring to the college experience is good.

The analysis suggests adult students look to their classrooms as a place where

they want acceptance, and the good news in the findings is that almost every student felt

accepted, felt they were accepted by their peers. Interestingly, and perhaps quite telling

is the fact that three of the non-completed students expressed feeling they did not fit with

their peers in some classroom environments. Additionally, a few of the continuing

students commented they felt same way, but in each instance, for continuing and non-

completed students alike, the issue was that these participants felt they did not seem to

share the same high level of expectation of the classroom environment.

Summary

Identifying Expectations as the central category was not as clear a discovery as

the memo may suggest, but it was a major event in this research study. Progress was

good up to this point but as stated, the hope was that a central category would be

developed from the data to be constructed to form of theory. As Strauss and Corbin

(1998) state, watching theory evolve is indeed a fascinating process, but also as they

assert, it did take a lot of interaction between the researcher (me) and the data.

Putting the data through the analytical techniques was quite interesting, with each

new analysis being both an opportunity for further validation and a chance for

invalidation. Strauss and Corbin (1998) offer several important points in this process,

with the first being a reminder that categories are abstractions that should have relevance

to all the cases in the study. After reviewing the data several times I am confident this

has occurred with this study.

　　　　In this chapter, I identified the central category of Expectations Influence

Persistence and through selective coding progressed to the construction of theory which

revealed a theoretical statement, *Adult students' expectations of their college experiences*

influence their perceptions and assessment of the actual experiences, thereby influencing

their decisions to persist in or depart college. This theory serves as an explanation to the

phenomenon of college experiences influencing students' decisions on persistence, and

when combined with the information learned in description of the four categories in the

findings in Chapter Four, provides answers to the primary and secondary research

questions.

　　　　Chapter Six details a thought experiment conducted during this research, looking

in the data for patterns of behavior that might illustrate various perspectives shared by

some groups of students, and looking at how those perspectives might also influence

students' expectations and perceptions.

CHAPTER SIX

TYPOLOGY OF PERSPECTIVES

An important practice in qualitative research is to look at data from as many logical perspectives as possible. This is especially important in grounded theory where as the researcher progresses, greater and greater abstraction is necessary, with the ultimate goal being to integrate all of the categories and subcategories to form a larger theoretical scheme. With this principle in mind, I looked for additional perspectives to view that data that my adherence to grounded theory methods had not yet included. In this my methodology advisor suggested looking at the potential of identifying a typology of perspectives among the participants as a thought experiment to see what information it might provide. This chapter details that endeavor.

It should be noted that the use of types here would not come close to the level of complexity some studies employ in typologies, but there is still value in their use as practiced in this study. Patton (2002) defines typologies as classification systems made up of categories that divide some aspect of the world into parts along a continuum. Kluge (2000) explains that typologies play a meaningful role in qualitative research being used to comprehend, understand and explain complex social interactions. In fact, Macduff (2007), in looking at typology use in nursing actually provides the information most related to their use here, stating simply that typologies can be used to describe the character of a phenomenon. He provides the example where in nursing typologies are sometimes used to group types of family care, such as: preventive care, protective care, and preservative care. I used that as authority to tie my use of typologies back to the four categories of phenomena identified in Chapter Four, Findings.

Having spent a great deal of time with the data in developing the major categories as described in Chapter Four, Findings: *Importance of Relationships, Assessment of Value, Feelings of Fit, and Challenges Encountered*, I knew these categories were grouping of properties that reflected what the participants had identified as representing the phenomena that mattered to them in their college experiences. Understanding that at this point I had identified the theory that serves as an explanation for how students' expectations influence their perceptions of college experiences, so I decided to use this thought experiment more to see how student's espoused perspectives on being an adult student might also influence their perceptions of experiences.

It is very important to note that this is not conducted at the same level of data collection and analysis as the other aspects of this research, but that said, the resulting three types, or more appropriately, three student perspectives are obvious in some aspects of their college experiences. By delving into the data produced in this research, I was able to go back and look at the individual concepts identified for each participant from the open coding, and just as that had led to identifying the beginnings of some potential categories, it led to groups of perspectives for this exercise.

Considering Possible Typologies

I noticed some participants' perspectives on college experiences were revealed in the analysis process, even in just small bits of data such words captured as a concept or quote. Comments like, "this is my $2000 this time" (Rayleen, FG2, 528), "I don't want it to be easy" (Mia, FG1, 406-407), "I will finish…I'm a finisher" (Angie, 81-85), and "don't jerk me around" (William, 109), and many others that provided clues to the mindsets involved. However, a closer review of the data showed that sometimes strong

comments like these were isolated remarks by participants, not routinely related to any one person or type.

I decided to look for any connection between student types and the category of Importance of Relationships. I soon determined that every participant spoke about relationships in one form or another, with some commenting very favorably, mentioning fondness for the opportunity to collaborate with other students; their appreciation for access to experienced teachers; admiration for the engagement of their advisors; or gratitude for easy to navigate business processes such as registering or the valuable support services such as the library's writing lab.

What emerged in this review was the realization that although all participants spoke at least indirectly about the importance of relationships, some addressed all levels of relationships (student/instructor, student/advisor, student/peer, and student/college) in more passionate and direct ways. Other participants approached relationships not necessarily devoid of passion, but more as a means to an end or as a business issue speaking more to the competence and reliability of others than to their caring, interest, and passion. Then there was a third group that in talking about relationships, described multiple perspectives of both good and bad relationships.

I looked next at the category, Feelings of Fit which again the data suggested different perspectives or approaches. Some participants spoke to how they felt they belonged in classrooms, with instructors, advisors, and peers, and even generally on the campus, with the same sort of passion described for Importance of Relationships, whereas others tended to present it more pragmatically, again seemingly looking at it more from a business perspective or not even giving it much consideration. Again close

examination showed a third group that provided more specific detail on various aspects of feeling that one fits.

Having seen the makings of three groups, I looked at the category of Assessment of Value with an eye toward seeing if indeed the data supported three groupings. I found participants who saw college attendance as essentially its own reward, almost seeming oblivious or at least unconcerned with the value assessment equation; participants who talked about the value attending college can bring to themselves; and ones who seemed to weigh every potential aspect of their college experiences as though making marks on a checklist of balancing a checkbook.

Looking finally at Challenges Encountered, there were common areas of challenge across participants, with key concepts involving: conflicting responsibilities; feelings of selfishness; time strain; and sacrifice. Still there was a difference, but it was more in how the concepts were addressed. One group seemed to look at them as personal matters that caused emotion; the second addressed them more as inconveniences that had to be resolved; and the third, spoke to almost all the concepts identified for the category.

As these perspective types began to reveal themselves, I created an informal chart where I listed the four categories on one side and open, unlabeled columns to make a few notations of comments made that reflected the participants' perspectives. Recognizing this was very similar to the grouping performed in axial coding to pull similar concepts together to form potential categories, I followed the same process. This led to three major groupings that I did not yet have names for, but they essentially represented patterns in the participants' perspectives as related to the categories. The result of the charting is summarized in Table 6. As the data grew, I practiced reduction as I had in

axial coding, essentially making new chart sheets with fewer columns to represent

perspectives. I eventually reduced this to three main participant perspectives.

In looking at the category, Importance of Relationships, there were obvious

patterns where several participants made clear that relationships were of utmost

importance to them, in fact so much so that all other categories were influenced by the

quality of the relationships. Other students valued relationships but did not seem to

consider them the most important aspect of their college experiences. Looking at the

category, Assessments of Value, I again saw some patterns in groups of participants, with

some essentially taking a pragmatic approach of assessing value based upon how the

experience would relate to achieving their goals. Others, however, weighed multiple

aspects of an experience in determining its value, and a final group that assessed value

almost exclusively upon the relationships experienced.

As this process continued, I also reviewed the memos made during the coding,

finding more key words that stood out as appropriately representing each type.

Eventually, as with development of the categories, key aspects were more obvious and I

decided to label and describe the main three perspectives revealed in the data:

- Type 1: Enthusiasts - delighted to have a chance to return to school, excited, enthused.

- Type 2: Finishers - clear goals, plan for degree, committed, self-proclaimed finishers,

- Type 3: Balancers - assess costs vs. benefits, unsure commitment, always evaluating.

As mentioned earlier, these were not hard and fast types, as participants could

represent more than one type depending on the situation or phenomenon being discussed,

but overall, these types represented the majority of the participants. Table 6 provides an

illustration of key aspects of the types as related to the four categories.

Table 4

Student Typology Chart: Enthusiasts, Finishers, Balancers

Categories	Enthusiasts	Finishers	Balancers
Importance of Relationships	- close ties critical - wants relationships with instructors, advisors & peers - wants others to share their passion - sees instructors as peers, colleagues - takes pride in close ties to others	- good relationships reinforce focus - see instructors and advisors as partners - seeks others they see as similar - see relationships primarily as means to an end	- close ties are motivators to stay - compares value of school relationships to impact on home - feels torn between ties to college and other priorities - more relationships increase persistence
Assessment of Value	- sees attendance as its own reward - tied to relationships - wants to learn - wants instructors to love teaching - own love of college influences how others are assessed	- driven, wants same for instructors - weighs costs vs. long term gain - asks what benefit is - accountability is important	- weighs cost versus value on multiple levels - actively weighs experiences - not afraid to leave - keeps running log like a checkbook
Feelings of Fit	- looking for shared passion; no passion = no feeling of fit - wants to belong - without active relationships feels out of place - views college as second family	- key is in finding other finishers - shared goals help - needs recognition of personal goals - wants support from instructor, advisors, and peers	- fit matters; if there is no fit, why stay? - assesses how others fit or don't fit too - very particular in assessing fit - needs reassurance they belong
Challenges Encountered	- fit matters; if there is no fit, why stay? - assesses how others fit or don't fit too - very particular in assessing fit - needs reassurance they belong	- sees challenges as inconveniences to be endured - okay as long as challenges do not interfere with goals	- sees challenges as inconveniences to be endured - okay as long as challenges do not interfere with goals

The patterns of the of the Enthusiast describes the adult student that is just delighted to be here, loving learning, the class environment in general, and the opportunities to interact with faculty and peers. The patterns recognized as the Finisher, in contrast to the Enthusiast is the student with the perspective who rather than focusing on the joys of the experience is looking at it more as a finish line they need to reach, and at some point essentially says "No matter what, I will get there," and tries to forge through whatever the challenges may be. That leads to the Balancer, one who rather than having a finish line in sight, takes a more tentative approach. This pattern type represents the student whose perspective make them more likely to see themselves as having several challenges to attending school, be that just finding the time, paying the tuition, or giving up other priorities or commitments, all creating a frequent weighing of the costs versus the benefits, having to repeatedly decide whether to persist or leave.

It is important to note that some of the comments related to the concepts in each category were negative, sometimes relating to a lack of support from a professor, advisor, staff member, or peer, and often related to behaviors perceived as disrespectful towards themselves or others. These behaviors could be as simple as professors not appearing dedicated to student learning, an advisor not being responsive to students' perceived priority needs, a staff member not returning phone calls, or perceptions that peers were more interested in the grade than in learning. Interestingly, most of the negative comments revolved around something the professor, advisor, staff member or peer did not do, rather than something they did that was taken as negative.

In exploring the typology of the Enthusiasts, the Finisher, and the Balancer, please note that the research provided a wealth of thoughtful and heartfelt personal

anecdotes and quotes, graciously shared by the participants but privacy concerns do not

allow full sharing. In fact, in some instances I have slightly edited comments to protect

participant privacy, but for all data, I have been careful to present it in the context it was

received. All quotes used are believed to be representative of comments others made as

well (sometimes just a few, but normally reflective of the group).

Enthusiasts, Finishers, and Balancers

Adult students are a subset of the overall student population, but here the intent is

to break the group into smaller subsets while providing insight into how one's

perspective may influence college experiences. In this chapter I present the various types

and use data from two, three, or four of the participants to illustrate aspects of the

typology. All participants' experiences are more complex than this study can present, but

perhaps by adding this perspective, it will shed light on the whole issue.

The Enthusiast

The majority of the participants are represented by the pattern that will be called

The *Enthusiast*. Matt, who during the first focus group emphatically stated, "I love

school and I really have no overriding purpose to this, I mean I may do other things, I

don't really know why I'm doing this other than I really love school" (54-56). He did not

stop there, adding with great sincerity and I believe pride, "I think anybody can have any

kind of experience but nothing could really convince me not to do what I'm doing. I

mean they could blow the place up [and I would still attend]" (57-58). Matt even

mentions things that might bother others but says they do not faze him because he is in a

place where he is very happy [his college].

Linda, a definite Enthusiast, declared, "This is such a great journey for me" (15-16) and, "I also have very close ties with younger people and I have just been so inspired by them; they are just so willing to share what they know and have kind of taken me as a colleague and not necessarily as a, [pause] you know we tease about age but I don't think that that's it I've never felt like I didn't belong here, I've always felt that I'm, you know, I'm accomplishing and I'm on the top part of it you know, I know what's going on and I love it" (52-58). Linda expressed her enthusiasm about the college experience in very uplifting statements:

> I just couldn't believe my luck because I got to come back and I never thought I
> would…. I thought oh my god, this is so cool and I didn't even know it was this
> cool…. I was like gosh I'm good at this, this is just this is just crazy that this is
> happening…I was always like reading everything and did all kinds of,…they
> teased me, and my children think that I'm probably the biggest nerd here…. But
> in terms of feeling fit I really felt that I worked hard to establish a hard work
> ethic…. This is a perfect place for me…instead of going on [to another school].
> (84-96)

Perhaps Linda's strongest statement of all that represents an Enthusiast was, "I think this is home for me" (97). Linda clearly loves the school, loves the learning, and loves the future she sees the program helping to provide.

Robin and Jenni also appeared to be Enthusiasts. In talking about classes she loved Robin said her two favorites were ones where she learned stuff she had not learned before, and called them wonderful because they exceeded her expectations. In Jenni's interview she first described the type of class she didn't like as ones where students are

expected to learn on their own, and the expectations are low, then she described good

classes, this time talking about love from a different perspective, "the instructors are not

just there for the money, they actually care about what they're teaching, and they have

that passion…instructors that actually do it, because they love it. Those are the ones you

want to learn from" (281-286).

Properties are the "general or specific characteristics or attributes of a category"

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 117). The term then stands for characteristics or attributes of

phenomena that mattered to the participants in describing their college experiences.

Some of the obvious properties relative to Importance of Relationships and Feelings of

Fit, as represented here by Matt, Linda, Robin, and Jenni, include: *attitude, motivation,*

dedication, encouragement, love of learning, commitment, goals, support, interaction,

and cared about, socialization, acceptance, enjoyment, and *understanding.* Although the

Enthusiasts may be best depicted by the categories of relationships and feelings of fit,

like all types, they have experiences that are listed under the categories of assessment of

value and challenges as well. Matt, Linda, Robin and Jenni's stories also illustrate

experiences in phenomena represented by properties such as: *collaboration, passion,*

expectations, and *rewards*, to name a few, and all students are undoubtedly impacted by

Challenges, especially as tied to the properties of *competing priorities, time strain*, and at

least occasional *disappointment*.

This last sentence should serve notice, that even the most positive of adult

students, no matter how in love with their college experiences they may be, all will be

subject to challenges, even in the areas they love so. Here are some examples from the

same participants that illustrate the point that college experiences can include many

different emotions.

After strongly expressing his love of the college experience, and right after saying

they could blow the place up and he would still attend, Matt went on to say that it was

obvious that the relationships he has with his advisor and certain instructors was very

meaningful and very important to him, adding, "I guess that I've sort of taken for granted

that that's the way it's supposed to be but I'm sure that's not true everywhere" (59-63).

Matt was making clear that the relationships he enjoyed were integral to his outspoken

love of the college experiences.

Many weeks later I contacted Matt and asked what the key was to his loving the

college experience and he said it was the relationships, but then went on to explain a very

important point. The relationships with the professors are so important to him because

those close relationships, complete with their open discussion and intellectual sharing,

help him expand his knowledge and his passion for learning in ways that help him have

the same sort of relationships with the younger students that he teaches. That's when he

added, "and it's all about them" (personal conversation, Matt, 9 May 11).

Linda's statements make clear just how much the college experience means to

her, but we should not assume that loving school means there are no strong emotions

about poor experience, because Linda clearly has them, and so do others. Here are a few

quotes that inform every category: "The biggest frustration is in the classroom

experience because…I have had some teachers…that I just think, if I can work this hard

so can you" (114-116). Properties in that short statement include effort, frustration,

disappointment, passion, and relevance, and several are from across the categories. Age

also seems to matter in adult students' perspective too, sometimes it is about fitting in with their peers, or with instructors, and sometimes it is about expectations, as Linda says, "[the professor] putting the slide up there, reading the slide, and I'm thinking, I'm 55, what's this deal? That's not cutting it for me anymore…Why are you reading, you're better than this, it just takes a little energy" (123-128).

Speaking of expectations (and she was), in relating an example of a frustrating professor she states, "That's it!, that's what he or she is doing in the classroom that I paid a lot of money for and waited a long time to be able to do that is valuable to me as a learner is not valuable to him or her as an instructor?" (143-145). And to close this example, a couple of Linda's one liners that illustrate her passion: "When the teachers are bad, forget it (131)" and "If it [the class] was a meal, I'd send it back" (148). It is important to remember, this is the same participant that in describing her love of the college opportunity said, "I think this is home for me" (97), so in her own house, she feels very justified in speaking up.

Back to Linda's love of college, she makes clear the importance of relationships and value despite the frustrations raised above, "I wouldn't be here if I didn't have great professors" (152-155). This illustrates the Balancer within Linda's patterns of the Enthusiast.

In illustrating a different sort of concern, Robin related the situation of a friend rather than her own story, telling of a college instructor friend of hers that was struggling with whether or not to continue working towards his PhD.

> He told me that to get his PhD only benefits him, it doesn't benefit the school, it
> doesn't benefit his kids, doesn't benefit his wife, you know the only person that it

> benefits is him, so before he can, you know continue to make that decision, this
>
> very selfish decision, then he had to reconsider that, and decided to drop out of
>
> the program. (531-536)

The struggle Robin's friend was going through certainly speaks to the property of support and selfishness. In this case perhaps it is support from family and friends to continue and not look at it as selfishness, a property of the category Challenges.

Jenni, who had described instructors who love teaching as the ones you want to learn from, also described her first graduate course as a learn on your own course with low demands, so when I asked what if more classes had been like that one, she cut me off quickly and simply stated, "I probably would have left" (298-300). This is an example of one of the *if/then* statements referenced under the section on the category, Assessment of Value, and when I asked why her answer was again quick and simple, "Because I'm here to learn" (301-302). In further discussing that first class, Jenni said "I looked at that class and comments I made to people (about it) and I couldn't imagine paying $1800 for this" (717-718). She explained that some others felt as she did, but they were not the students who wanted the easy A. As she put it, "By about the third week in that course, somebody came in and said, just turn in your papers and everybody gets an A. I'm like, you're kidding me right?" (725-726). This violated Jenni's expectations of what proper research should be.

So the Enthusiasts just love being in school, and nothing will take that love of the college experience from them, except perhaps experiences that violate the bond they feel with the college experience; experiences that make their love no longer seem valued, respected, or returned. If that sort of experience happens then colleges might lose the

Enthusiasts, but based on the name of the next pattern, the Finisher one might think

relationships did not matter. As the discussion will show, relationships may be less of the

focus, but analysis suggests, they always matter.

The Finisher

The Finisher may also be an Enthusiast, but these are the ones who made very

clear they were finishers, in fact two of them stated that fact specifically. Perhaps others

feel the same way but just do not say it. Mia is a finisher, a fact she made clear in the

focus group interview and again during a one-on-one interview. Just after another focus

group member concluded a detailed story on her struggle with a college's business

processes (a college she left because of the troubles), Mia said,

> I'm stubborn and I was going to finish. And so it wouldn't have mattered I'd
>
> work through it you know with patience…. I might not have had a lot of respect
>
> for the business department or the business front of the university but I would not
>
> have quit, I wouldn't have given up just because they were incompetent that's not
>
> a reason to quit. (121-126)

As Mia tells of her experiences one might ask how she can be so sure she would

not leave. I quoted her earlier describing a less than rewarding class, "I was offended as

a doctoral student, we didn't discuss, it was awful, and he still teaches here" (193-194).

She goes on to say, "You know I've had a lot of phenomenal, phenomenal people as well,

but that one stands, you know how one negative stands out. It was like, we all have to

take this and it's such a waste…. Because it was so boring, it was an undergrad type, it

wasn't even that, I wouldn't even do that in high school" (202-205). Reinforcing her

Finisher perspective, when another student told of a poor experience as well, calling it just so disappointing, Mia immediately added, "Yes, but you don't quit" (211).

When a fellow student talks about being retired and enjoying school much more now, Mia says, "See, mine's totally personal, I want this degree, I don't want to get out of the classroom, I like the classroom,…and I love teenagers, I like working with them, I like the challenges…but this is personal, and this is a very good life example to teenagers that you just don't quit" (259-265). Here Mia reveals a bit of her reasoning for being a finisher, to be a good life example. Interestingly when other focus group members are talking about how, if a class was a waste of time to them they might quit the class, Mia adds, "or you would just finish it [pause] and learn what you can on your own" (Mia, 321). Mia is so much a finisher that she even urges peers to stick it out and learn on their own rather than quitting a class. Another student added, "yeah, with a bad attitude" (Raylie, 322).

Mia talked about not liking peers who did not participate in class, as she put it "it's when they're just there because it's one they have to check off the boxes,…they don't care, they do the minimum, those are the ones that ruin the class" (523-524). When I asked the group if they had anything to add to a conversation on what makes a class good for them, Mia said, "You want to be challenged. You want to learn, you want to go out with some nugget that you didn't have before. I don't want it to be easy" (399-400). As the expression goes, Mia just said a mouthful. She identified her expectations that her peers would actively engage in class, an expectation echoed by many in this study and clearly supported in the data. Mia went so far as to accuse those non-engaged students of ruining the class, then she spoke to what she expected from the class, that it challenge

her, teach her, and not make it easy. Mia's story is filled with the phenomena that matter

to her as a finisher, including: usefulness, collaboration, accountability, expectations,

knowledge, content, reward, and effort.

Angie is also a Finisher, but I will say far less about her, in part because Mia has

illustrated the perspective so well, and also because Angie is fairly new in her program

whereas Mia is almost done; so I have to consider hers a position of experience. Angie is

a business owner who returned to school because the business she is in is hard hit by the

economy. When I asked if she were to start the business again would she still pursue her

degree she was very clear in her answer, "oh yeah, I'll finish this, I mean yeah, I'll finish

this, because I've started, you know gotten pretty well into it, and I don't want to waste

my money unless something unforeseeable happens health wise, or you know something

unforeseeable, I will finish, I mean I'm a finisher [laughter]. I mean, I always finish

things, so I mean yeah, I'll will finish this" (81-85). It sounds pretty clear to me that

Angie intends to finish.

Karen is another Finisher, however, she never used the term, but several things

she said support her being one. She is also very much an Enthusiast, because it seems

just being at school with others matters as much as what she is learning. Karen is a self-

proclaimed extrovert, stating, "I need to be with people" (507), and she had a huge desire

to get back to school, commenting about leaving school 39 years earlier, "It absolutely

killed me when I quit college, to have babies, and every September I would get so

nervous, I'm supposed to be in school, I'm supposed to be in school, despite the fact that

I have a two year old and a four year old and I'm not going anywhere" (382-385). Karen

attributed her return to school with wanting to finish her degree, saying learning is

intrinsic in her nature, but she also admitted wanting it to fit in better at her job where others all have degrees and many have more than one. Her desire to be with others is a socialization matter as related to Feelings of Fit, but college also appeals to the properties of collaboration, passion, and rewards as related to Value.

Elise, also a Finisher, talked of getting discouraged at times, as she completed her degree more than 30 years after leaving college the first time. When I asked what she attributed her drive to finish was she offered a perspective I had never thought of, "Well, I'd think okay what if I died tomorrow, and I didn't finish it then there would always be that. And I think the one thing when people ask me why I went back, and I always say this and I really mean it, I didn't want to die and my obituary would state attended the University of [name]. When you see that you know they didn't graduate" (973-977). In that short story is a pretty clear property of reward with the dimension range running from "why do I care," to "this matters to me," I think it is pretty clear where Elise stands,

As a final example, Dee is the absolute Finisher, so named because she was absolute in her resolve that she would finish, quite simply because as she put it, "All I care about is the money and keeping my job" (128-129). She explained that were it not for the raise and the job security, she would not have even returned to school. That is not to say Dee did not enjoy her classes, instructors or peers, but what mattered most to her was getting a raise that would accompany her completion of a certificate program, and the added job security that would accompany its completion. To illustrate her drive, Dee considered the enrollment process a nightmare based primarily on the bureaucracy. In her own words,

I have had so many problems with the enrollment process and it's not the

advisors, it seems to be the…I don't know if it's the bureaucracy, I think it's the

bureaucracy, you know you have to fill out this form and that form and then I

filled out the forms and you have to take them in by a certain date, and if you

don't get them in by that date than you have to wait to enroll in classes, and unless

you get permission, and, [pause] it's just been a nightmare (147-153).

She went on to describe her frustrations with the administrative system in getting

her classes organized, stating, "feel like I've been hacking my way through getting an

education, like cutting your way through a forest, it's just hacking through" (Dee: 227-

229). It is clear that Dee is a person on a mission, and accomplishing the mission means

completing the 15 graduate hours required for a certificate. Interestingly she seems to

feel that she is not alone in her approach to college, as reference earlier, she said, "I think

adults, when we return, we are knowledgeable enough to know we're going to do

whatever it takes, because most people who are older, they know what's required of them

and they get the job done" (298-302).

In considering experiences that may influence Finishers, I interviewed Mia again,

this time in a one-on-one interview (previously it was as part of a focus group). She had

recently completed her classes and when I asked her to discuss her experiences as I had

everyone else, Mia began by describing her frustration with her advisor, frustrations that

arose primarily from a lack of responsiveness, including over a month with no response

to documents the advisor pressed her to submit. When she checked on their status her

advisor said she had fallen under the radar. This event angered and disappointed Mia, as

she explained,

Once I quit taking classes, no one cared whether you did anything. You know I

didn't get any emails, didn't get any encouragement, didn't get any, except from

my ABD group… but I, um, asked her to even prod me along, and she didn't.

She said, will you need to make up a calendar when you're going to do things,

blah, blah, blah. (136-142)

Here we have a Finisher expressing experiences of frustration related to properties such

as standards, accountability, customer service, constructive feedback and others related to

Value, but also relating her frustration very much to properties related more to

relationships, including at the very least, *communication, encouragement, engagement,*

responsiveness, and *support*.

I gently reminded Mia of her comment about being a Finisher during the focus

group interview and asked if she had ever thought to herself that she wouldn't keep

going. Mia said, "I think this past year, I've had that feeling, it's like, why bother?,

what's the point? You know, except I want, I want it" (152-154). It may be a good thing

she is also, as she put it, stubborn.

Angie had pronounced her finisher status very confidently and nothing gave any

indication otherwise until I asked her if anything could change her mind and without

hesitation she commented on the Assessment of Value, "yeah, if it weren't challenging,

and interesting, why bother? (Mia's exact words). You know, I mean I wouldn't do it.

But you know, so far it is, I think it's good" (465-467).

Karen's story is motivating, having returned after 39 years and absolutely loving

the experience, so I expected I was wasting time in asking about her experiences with her

instructors and advisors, but it turns out she has never had an advisor. She did participate

in a mentor program that matched newer students with experienced ones, and she thought

was a great program but it has since been discontinued. As far as the instructors Karen

said, "the instructors had just been absolutely super. I have not had a bad instructor….

Every teacher has been outstanding and so supportive" (251-255).

Receiving the response I expected, I almost left it there but after asking what

made a class good for her she said there were three kinds of teachers in her school, then

she described the first as ones that walk in, sit down and introduce a topic then tell the

class to go for it, and they just sit back and let students talk about any and everything,

calling that style a *discussion explosion*. She went on to describe a facilitator style which

she said she loves because they support discussion but manage the class, keeping

discussion on topic and stopping one student from monopolizing, then described a more

Socratic teacher (her term) who does some teaching, ask questions, but does not have

much open discussion. She called that a very good style as well.

It seemed clear Karen did not especially care for the first style, despite having

praised all her instructors and stating she had not had a bad one. I then asked her how she

would feel about that teaching style being used in a class where the content was very

important to her. Her reply which followed a long pause was surprising,

> I'm taking some time to answer that….it's really a good question, that is my least
>
> favorite, [intense sounding] and in the beginning I hated it. [more intense now] I
>
> absolutely hated it , because I figured, this is a total waste of time, because I
>
> didn't understand what I could get out of that, I was thinking too small. (319-323)

It turns out she thought she was "thinking too small" because after writing to the

professor to express her concern on the style, she was told it was a style used to bring

others out so they could learn from each other. She said she felt better then because she

started to settle down and not expect every class period to strictly follow the learning for

that day.

In the next quote from Karen she temporarily departs from her Finisher

perspective, illustrating that she, as with others, is not limited to one perspective, but also

making clear how the level of the discord referred to in Chapter Five can make a

significant difference in one's perception of an experience. I asked Karen how she would

feel if all her classes used the style of teaching she had just described and her response

was immediate and emphatic, "I would have quit." She then went on to explain her

reason for attending classes, and while speaking faster and with clearly more emotion

than she had at any other point in the interview, to share her frustrations with the style:

> [spoken intensely throughout] I'm there because I want to learn. I really don't
>
> care about the grade, the grade doesn't mean anything to me, despite the fact that
>
> I'm getting all A's. I am there to learn, there are students there who were there,
>
> and are there in class, because they want a piece of paper to get a better job. My
>
> piece of paper will not get me a better job, I'm really there to learn. So if I'm not
>
> learning, and I'm just having to sit there and listen to other students babble, about
>
> non topics, that does in fact upset me. And if every class was like that, I'd walk
>
> away. Because I would not be getting what I needed, and what I wanted, and the
>
> reason why I was there. I have had classes like that, that I've set in, and I have . .
>
> [stressing] endured, because the whole program is so great, and because that's sort
>
> of thing isn't for every single class, just some classes that get out of control in that

way. And so, you're absolutely, yeah you're right, for the adult student, we're

actually there because we want to learn something. (345-360)

As is obvious, this was quite a departure for Finisher Karen, as she made clear

that if she felt she was not learning she would leave, despite the 39 year break since last

taking classes, and despite needing to be with people. That was powerful, and I felt a

responsibility to ensure Karen did not take my questioning as a criticism of the teaching

style. So after completing the interview I addressed it more with her and left confident

that she was not going to call the school and quit because my questions had aroused her

emotions. That said, this piece of data clearly illustrates properties and dimensions of

each of the categories of Importance of Relationships, Feelings of Fit, Assessment of

Value and Challenges Encountered.

Karen clearly stated the class was not meeting her wants, needs, or her reason for

being there, and yet she did not quit, not the college and not even the class, although her

comments suggest she just might next time (quit the class). Hopefully she will be able to

avoid a next time by discussing her expectations before signup up for the class.

So far the analysis has provided perspective types of the Enthusiasts and

Finishers. The Enthusiasts represent the perspective of loving college with no

consideration of leaving unless things go really awry, but these are also the students that

have clear expectations as shown by comments like, "If I can work this hard so can you"

(Linda, 114-116). The Finishers are the ones that will finish, that is unless classes stop

meeting their expectations for challenge and interest. The third perspective type is the

Balancer, and by the title alone, it sounds like these students could go at any time.

The Balancer

William is a Balancer, but as with others he also is likely a Finisher and quite frankly he's a hard charging student that will not likely let anything get in his way, perhaps so much so that he deserves his own typology of Charger. That said, William fits into the Balancer type, he is just more outspoken than some of the other Balancers.

After reviewing and re-reviewing the data, I feel safe in saying that William is likely not actively weighing the balance between persisting and departing at this time, as he makes clear he needs the degree so unless something changes that, he will persevere. However, without doubt William weighs the costs versus benefit of his college experience. The difference between William and other Balancers is that he has already decided the return on investment is worth the price of admission. I use him here to illustrate a characteristic I think is inherent in Balancers, that being their increased self-awareness and increased awareness of others (people and situations) that impact their assessment of the balance between continued persistence and leaving.

As William states, "Tell me what needs to be done and I'm going to do it because that's what I'm focusing on. I'm not the kid who's looking for a great doctoral graduate experience" (74-76). That is balancing; he doesn't need the experience, just needs the degree. William has many positive things to say about his current college experience, especially as compared to one he left, a decision he made when he decided the balance shifted against persistence there. He also observed at one point during the interview that some of his comments sounded crass but that was not how he meant them. I think it safe to say William says things with passion, and the comments shared here do not represent the full person.

A Balancer looks at many aspects of the college experience, some that others might not even notice. William far outpaced all other participants with his ability to comment on various aspects of college experiences, noting everything from how he is treated (generally very pleased, sees it as shared respect); to business processes, match with his advisor (again pleased and surprised it is such a high-level person), how his experience is recognized, his treatment as an individual versus a number, the parking challenges, the small room with vending machines for students, the use of technology by instructors, how classes are taught, what the expectations are, and the annoying habit of professors to give extra credit in graduate courses, to name just some of the experiences William mentioned.

In the last paragraph alone, William's story addresses all four categories, and from that abbreviated list he was able to easily recount, it is clear he is very aware of his college experiences. When asking about his specific experiences he continued to be forthright, saying his best experiences have been limited, primarily due to frustration with low level of the learning and low expectations and stating that he has seen higher expectations in freshmen and sophomore classes than graduates ones in his school. William expressed frustration with his peers quality, attitude, and behavior, and with the lack of rigor in classes, and the poor teaching styles. As he put it, "I've learned things, I'd just haven't liked the way I learned them, and that's about as honest as I can be about it, it's not my preferred learning style" (175-177). There again he is balancing, learning and style.

William spoke of his frustration from many different angles. Perhaps his most clarifying statement was, "I'm highly motivated to get through it, and if this is what I

have to do,…then I'm going to do it" (188-189) and points out that he turns things to

where they work for him. William thrives on challenging courses especially when peers

are fully engaged, commenting to his wife after the first night of his most rigorous class,

"I'm finally in the game" (347-348). The balance it seems for William is that on one

hand he is a very busy person with a clear need for the degree, so to balance, the other

hand must offer the properties we see in the Value category, usefulness, competency,

passion, reward, rigor and standard, among others. The Balancer, perhaps more than

others, has clear expectations.

Becky is a Balancer as well, and in fact one that decided after finishing all classes

that the balance did not support working on her dissertation to complete her PhD. While

she does not verbalize as many aspects of her college experiences in her balancing as

William did, she takes the return on her investment very seriously. Her story is one of

frequent assessment between her college experiences and the impact they had on her

ability to do a job she absolutely loves.

In all previous college attendance, Becky's pragmatic approach to college classes

clearly sounds like the perspectives of a Finisher, one with clear goals, a plan for the

degree, and one committed to finishing. She explains that perspective well herself,

stating, "I went back to school every time, to learn, to use what I learned…and those

degrees have always helped me get to be what I wanted to be" (103-105). In the doctoral

program, however, the Balancer part of her approach to college was strongest. The

Finisher part may well be what saw Becky through all the classes, but then the Balancer

won out and she decided to depart without completing the dissertation.

The data in fact suggests that Becky balanced the costs versus the benefit throughout her program, but just continued making the decision in favor of continuing to take classes until reaching the final stage of her program, the dissertation. Now Becky was very reluctant to discuss anyone's role in her decision to depart beyond her own, offering comments such as, "I don't know that I necessarily needed to get the doctorate for me" (105-106) and "I guess it was not the goal, the learning was the goal" (107-108). These comments both include what sounds like uncertainty, "I don't know" and "I guess" but at other times Becky is resolute in her decision not to complete the dissertation, stating "If I had decided this is what I want to do, and I had to do this…I'd have it done by now…I know how I am" (247-249).

Becky repeatedly put her decision to depart squarely on her own shoulders but in discussing her reasoning she reveals some of the balancing that goes on in her decision making:

> I've had multiple people tell me, just do a project and get it done, I mean it's just
> a silly paper, write this stupid paper, it's like any other paper. Part of it is I
> probably couldn't do that, I don't do anything that way, I don't do the school, I
> don't do my home, I don't do my children, you know, it's [pause] I would only do
> something, it would have to be meaningful, it would have to be useful, it would
> have to have a purpose. (238-244)

In that excerpt, Becky is clearly expressing the category of Assessment of Value, referring to properties of *accountability, content, effort, rigor, standards* and usefulness, applying them all towards her own effort and results, and although she admits that other

schools, and even other advisors may not require such high standards, she holds herself to them, and her advisor would have similar expectations of her.

This last point relates to the Importance of Relationships category and reveals more balancing that Becky engages in leading up to her decision to depart. It also sounds a bit like she has a contract with herself regarding her level of performance. She then adds her advisor in to the discussion, as Becky stated, "He would expect me to go out and do something much bigger than what I would have the time to do" (207-209). She goes on to explain the positive relationship she continues to have with her advisor even since departing the program, then adds, "but, do I want to write a dissertation with him? No" (210-211). Becky then returns to taking all responsibility for departing on herself, only reluctantly later commenting that during her final class designed to help prepared students to write their dissertation, she experienced what she considered resistance to her dissertation ideas. In a follow-on interview, Becky admitted that her perceived lack of support from key faculty was a factor in her decision to depart.

Once Becky began to share a bit more about some of the frustrations she faced in a few classes, she clearly showed her Finisher side in being able to push through that got her to this point in education, as she put it, "even if you go to a class that you don't think is the best class in the world, you still have interaction with colleagues…. I still would get things from those classes" (336-345). That quote also illustrates more of the balancing Becky was engaged in, in that, even when not delighted with a class, she made the decision to continue by finding other value in the encounter.

I used Terry's data to illustrate how open coding was used to capture concepts and move toward axial coding, but her story warrants a brief mention here as well, as she

definitely exhibits both the Enthusiast and the Balancer types, and in the end her Balancer approach led her to leave a funded doctoral program. In Terry's doctoral journey she faced several issues that she had to make a decision on to determine the balance of her cost versus benefit equation. From her story those included:

- Insurmountable *time challenges* and *conflicting responsibilities*: Terry said, "This is totally taking away from me feeling prepared for the week" (104), and "so for me it came down to, what is it that I love?"

- *Authenticity* and *common purpose*: She sometimes felt she did not fit in with her peers, seeing the program as requiring a different mindset and feeling some of her peers had a mindset she was uncomfortable with, believing some were focused on the title not on students, calling that, "too high a price for me" (172).

- *Competing priorities* and *selfishness*: Telling about the sacrifices she saw two family members make in getting their doctorates she commented, "sometimes I worry about the price you pay in order to go for this goal, what are you saying no to?" (220-221).

- *Need*: As discussed earlier, Terry asked, "Did I need to have a PhD after my name?... No, not at all…Do I need that to be a better teacher?... I think it's actually getting in the way" (535-538).

- *Requirements, sacrifice, selfishness*: Continuing with the balance between self and the degree, right or wrong, Terry felt the balance did not work for her;

> If the selection process requires, in order to get a PhD, you have to be able to put everybody else's needs aside in order for you to focus, to get this terminal degree, I'd never do it, I'd never be able to do it, I cannot. (351-354)

- *Road blocks*: Terry told of a class she was taking as part of the doctoral program that was required, and it was in a subject she enjoyed. As the class was ongoing she learned it required her to purchase a software program to do the work, and although the software would be paid for, the class was already taking all of her time so she did not see how she could possibly learn that program, do the class, and teach (her highest priority).

> That was a huge stumbling [block], that was a huge, 'cause it was like, it was
> almost the same as saying, let's put a boulder on your path, and you've got to get
> around the boulder. And I remember going (pause) I mean, it was, it was, it was
> shocking! (630-633)

These are just some of the issues Terry says she faced in making the decision to leave the program. These, and other events, relate very closely to the properties of the four categories used in this study, and looking at the data as a whole suggest all of these could play a significant role in Terry's ultimate decision. However, she would say the key issue was that she did not have time to be a doctoral student and the kind of teacher she demanded of herself. I cannot say, that if the other issues Terry faced were removed from the equation, that time challenges alone would not have been enough to still tilt the balance toward departure, but I do wonder.

Neither Becky nor Terry verbalized as many aspects of their college experiences in balancing their decisions to stay or depart as William did, but the analysis shows they spoke of the same sort of issues: *treatment, respect, peer engagement, business processes, advisors,* and *expectations.*

Perhaps Shannon provided the best example of the perspectives of a balancer, in her comments on how she balanced various cost versus benefit aspects of college:

One of the things that I had on the table was the cost. I'm single and self

supporting and I'm in a committed relationship but I have my own finances and I

just turned 40 so I'm looking at, I don't have $25,000 in the bank…so I'm

looking at taking this debt into my fifties. And I have to really think about, boy

those letters behind my name better be getting me somewhere, otherwise what's

the point? You know, and although the point would be, education in something I

didn't know about before, I still, um, in my fifties and a loan of $25,000 to

somebody is very frightening, so part of the attraction I think was that not only

did I finally convince myself that the learning would be worth it but it was such a

good program and it was such a good fit for my goals, it was a good fit for my

organization, it was something that if I leave my organization I can do something

else with this, but it wouldn't have been just a fluffy. You know without a little, a

lot of motivation to have a reason to do it, I wouldn't have put that investment in.

(560-575)

Shannon outlined important properties of Assessment of Value including, *costs,*

usefulness, need, knowledge, reward, and *relevance* among others. She also referred to

the category of Fit in referring to the program as a good fit for her goals, and she

mentioned *motivation*, a property under Importance of Relationships between the student

and the college.

Obviously all three, the Enthusiasts, the Finishers, and the Balancers have their

own ties to the categories and each individual has their own approach to college

experiences; they are not bound by any doctoral student created typology. The Enthusiast

may persist because to depart would be to give up something they love, the Finisher may

persist because they have made a commitment that they will finish, and the Balancer may persist because the scales stay just enough in balance to see them through.

Once again, all students may be part Enthusiast, part Finisher, and part Balancer, and sometimes one part is just stronger than the other, and that makes a difference depending on what our experiences are at the time. As an old story relates, when a long married couple was asked why they were able to stay together when so many do not, one of them lightheartedly explained they were still together because so far, they had not both wanted to leave at the same time. Perhaps there is a connection between that quip and those who stay and those who leave, as maybe we have stayed because the Balancer within us all has just not been at the forefront when challenges have been encountered.

When considering Enthusiasts Matt and Karen, if Matt did not have the relationships with his advisor and instructors that mean so much to him he might leave. Without good teachers to balance the teaching styles Karen admits she hates, she says she would leave. Mia, a confirmed Finisher now past the challenges of weekly course work, has begun asking herself, why bother, because she is now missing the support she wants and needs, and Angie who says she will finish because that is what she does, then adds, unless the courses lose their challenge and interest. Then there is Mike who admits that in the final months before graduation he has thought more than ever about quitting, offering that the challenge is not one big issue but the cumulative effect of many small challenges piling up to a decision point.

Although the data disclosed through this look at student typologies does not provide colleges with any sort of catalog of student types, it does provide some insight into how various perspectives can influence students' perceptions of their experiences. A

detailed study of student typologies could potentially assist colleges in their efforts to more effectively identify and discuss students expectations.

Summary

Is the decision to depart just a piling up of small frustrations, challenges, feelings of not belonging as Mike offered that it might be, or is it a big issue that just makes continuing seem impossible as Terry might suggest. Interestingly, the analysis suggests it was a cumulative effect for Terry, as illustrated by the many challenges she faced. This research cannot explain levels of frustration or challenge, or state what challenges will so influence Balancers or any other type that they would decide to depart without achieving their goals, but through this exercise it has shown that student' perspective types can join other factors in influencing students' expectations and perceptions.

Building upon the four central ideas (categories) identified in the data and described in Chapter Four, and Student's Expectations as the central category that led to the construction of a theory to serve as an explanation for the phenomenon, I then examined the data to consider the potential role of perspective types, identifying three: Enthusiasts, Finishers and Balancers. This typology experiment illustrated the potential complexity of issues involved in students' perceptions of their college experiences and provided more information for colleges to consider when working with students in selecting and mapping out college programs.

Once again it is important to note that nothing in this chapter is meant to suggest that students should be identified as one type or another. That is not to diminish the value of looking at the role perspective types can play in students' approach to the college experiences. To that end, this information has illustrated that perspectives can join other

factors in influencing students' expectations and perceptions of their college experiences.

Chapter Seven provides a discussion about various aspects of this study, from the ties between the literature and the findings, to the conclusions drawn from this study. It also offers comments on the limitations of this study and ideas for future research in this or related areas.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In bringing this study to a close, many points warrant discussion, from how the literature informed this study at the beginning to its application throughout. This chapter will look at how the findings are supported by the literature, and as appropriate will point out where the two diverged. An important aspect of any study, is to expand the field of knowledge, so how this study met that goal will be addressed as well.

In moving from discussion to conclusions, I will briefly summarize the key points of this study, and to make the data more useful to consumers of the research or future researchers I will explain the known limitations faced, and will provide a few ideas for future research. In closing out the chapter and the study, I will offer a few final personal thoughts on this topic that as an adult student mattered to me coming in to this study, and matter to me still.

The Literature and the Data

This study began with an explanation of the problem that despite millions of dollars spent each year to improve retention of college students, the rates of graduation have not changed much in a hundred years. As noted experts told us two decades ago, despite our gains in understanding student departure, "there is still much we do not know" (Tinto, 1993, p. 35), and "Researchers are far from understanding the causes of college student attrition" (Braxton & Brier, 1989, p. 60). My review of the literature offered little to suggest those somewhat dated quotes were any less accurate.

In introducing the significance of this particular study, I explained that the sample being examined here, adult students between 40 and 65 years of age, one who had

returned to college after a significant gap primarily to obtain graduate degrees, was a growing student population (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1996), and that few had studied this group, as most studies on adult students focused on the undergraduates. The intent of this study was not to make it about the level of college courses being pursued, as there are studies that focus on doctoral student attrition, but more to look at what college experiences matter to the 40 to 65 year old student, and how those experiences influence their decisions on persistence.

As only three of this study's participants were interviewed regarding their undergraduate experiences, this study did not attempt to explore the potentially unique challenges an adult student might have in reentering college classrooms filled with students coming straight from high school. Thankfully others such as , Comings et al. (1999), Justice (1997), Kasworm (2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2008) and Sissel et al. (2001) are giving this issue great attention.

As the findings in Chapter Four suggest, college experiences, as perceived by adult college students' do influence their decisions on persistence. As the development of a central category and construction of a theory to serve as an explanation for that phenomenon better explain, adult student's expectations of their college experiences influence their perception of the actual experiences, and that perception can then influence the students' decisions on persistence.

The Five Areas of Interaction

This study focused on the adult students' experiences as related to their college experiences in five main areas, Business Processes, Support Services, Student/Advisor Interactions, Classroom Environment, and Feelings of Fit, regardless of their level of

study. Although the findings showed that two of these areas, Business Processes and

Support Services were not as significant across the data as a whole, there was still

information to be learned in these areas.

  Business processes. Business Processes, called business procedure or

bureaucratic factors when discussed by Bean (2005) refer to the interaction occurring

between students and the service providers at a college. As Bean stated, this interaction

could include student exchanges with various offices on campus such as registration,

cashier's office, campus police, and the like to pay tuition, get a student ID or parking

pass, and can include visits to various offices to obtain registration forms, add/drop slips,

and other such needs. He asserts these exchanges can lead to students becoming

discouraged if they perceive bureaucracy as more important to college staff than student

service, and calling the bureaucratic aspects of colleges soulless, he said they could

deadened students spirits rather than being uplifted by their academic experiences.

  As stated, this study only revealed two significant experiences related to business

processes, but both resulted in students leaving other schools, with Raylie attributing her

departure precisely to what Bean (2005) describes when he talks about students becoming

disenfranchised when they feel they have been given the run-around, causing them to

develop negative attitudes toward their schools, and therefore being less likely to remain

until graduating. Despite the lack of concerning data on business processes in this study,

I would expect this is an area of more significant concern to students engaging in school

for the first time such as adults entering undergraduate programs. Also, the lack of data

may represent overall satisfaction with this study's colleges. Beyond recommendations to

establish student-friendly business processes, no real specifics were found in the research,

however, in the area of student support services, researchers were more forthcoming.

Support services. As was the case with the area of business processes, this study

did not reveal much emphasis from the students regarding support services, however,

there are instances where their use might have made a difference, with Barb's departure

as an ABD student due to poor writing skills being a significant a major example. Miller

et al. (2005) assert that students should rightfully expect colleges will provide services to

help them succeed, and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) point out that services such as

tutoring centers offering academic assistance are intended to promote student persistence.

The fact that Barb said she was unaware of her school's writing lab raised a concern

repeated within other stories of this study. The point is that support services are only

useful if used, and if students are not fully aware of what they offer then they can be seen

as wasted opportunities.

Kuh et al. (2005) suggest that schools that desire to increase student persistence

should implement and advocate the use of such learner-centered support services. It

stands to reason that by advocating their use, Kuh, et. al. include ensuring students are

fully informed about the services. Adelman (1999) claims that such services produce

statistically significant positive impacts on student persistence. In studying traditional

students, Ardaiolo, Bender, and Roberts (2005), assert that most students expect colleges

to provide services such as academic advising, health services, and a safe environment.

They go on to suggest that services must be provided in a way that complements the

educational mission, a goal they argue requires colleges to consider the student as the

focus of the services provided.

Much of the research (Habley, 1994, Tinto, 1987) include academic advising under support services and I included it as an example as well when introducing the topic, however, the only references made to advising during this study were in relation to knowing what classes to take or in hiring of personal tutors. Beyond that, all references to advising was in the vein of student/advisor relationships as is more common when students are engaged in their thesis or dissertation work. Again, this may be an example where the interactions are far more common among undergraduate students.

Student/Advisor interactions. As illustrated in the findings of this study, student and advisor interactions were identified as a major area of influential college experiences for these adult students. The literature provided excellent data on the importance of student/advisor interactions, with Chun-Mei et al., (2007) asserting that relationship is one of the most important aspects of doctoral education, and Lovitts (2001) asserting that unsatisfactory interactions between students and advisors was implicated in students' decisions to leave school without completing their degrees.

Adding to the discussion was Girves and Wemmerus (1988) who concluded that the more interactions doctoral students had with their advisors, the more likely they were to progress through their programs, and O'Bara (1993) who found from her research with 123 doctoral degree completers and 107 non-completers that the students who completed their degrees described more positive interactions with their dissertation chairs than did non-completers, and finding that completers rated their advisors as more approachable, more helpful, and more understanding than did non-completers.

Interestingly, these literary references include comments on the approachability, helpfulness, and understanding of the advisors as being important as related to students'

persistence, but two of the non-completers in this study, Becky and Barb, both talk of

their close relationship with their advisors, yet they still departed without completing

their degrees. In Becky's case, analysis suggests she was influenced by a perceived lack

of support from others involved in the dissertation process, and despite her admiration for

her advisor, she admits his expectations exceeded that of others, making the task more

imposing than it is for other students. Barb considered her advisor as a mother, yet she

left without engaging the support services that might have kept her in the program. This,

along with other comments suggests that a successful relationship between students and

advisors includes more than closeness, perhaps another key would tie to one of the most

important factors identified as a positive in the classroom, the students' being challenged.

Classroom environment. Along with the influence of Student/Advisor

Relationships, the data suggest the classroom environment as having the most sway

regarding students' perceptions of their college experiences. This is supported by the fact

the data also show a stronger level of students' expectations as regard to classroom

environment experiences. When considering the four categories and the central category

developed in this study, all four of them are tied closely with classroom experiences.

Braxton et al. (2000) assert that teaching practices of college and university

faculty play a significant role in the college student departure process. The cases of

several participants in this study support this claim, with Terry referring to one class

seeming like a boulder put in her path to success, Ray including the one class he took as

not providing any sense of worth, and Kathy explaining how the level of the classes was

often below her abilities. In that one statement, I have identified the role of the classroom

in the departure of three non-completers, and to that I can add examples of those who

have issued the if/then statements, suggesting if some experiences they have had in the

classroom were to continue, they too would depart.

Tinto (2005) pointed out the importance of involvement in the classroom for

student retention in that with non-residential students, as the vast majority of adult

students would be, and all in this study were, the classroom is "the one place, perhaps the

only place, where they meet each other and the faculty. If involvement does not occur

there, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere" (p.3).

Regarding the Braxton et al. (2004) rather scathing comments (p. 58) on the

influence of very negative attitudes and behaviors of some faculty negatively affecting

the intellectual development of undergraduate students; the findings of this study support

that assertion, however, it is important to note, that there were very few examples given

of such behavior in this study, yet in those few examples the students' responses were

negative and strong. It also bears noting that the article refers to the influence on

undergraduates, I would offer that the reaction of adult students, and perhaps especially

graduate level adult students would potentially be even stronger. As participant

comments illustrated, when events, actions or interactions in class or with advisors are

perceived as negative, students' feelings of fit are also impacted negatively.

Feelings of fit. There does not appear to be one single phenomenon that drives

students' decisions on persistence, but rather the data suggest students weigh the totality

of their experiences, perhaps in an evaluation of asking if they fit in the experience. The

majority of the literature addressing this area do so from the perspective of the traditional

student fitting into their new environs of the college campus, however, Kasworm's

(1990) statement that "Adults do not live apart; rather, they are a part of their world" (p.

366), informs this discussion. As Kasworm makes clear, adult students engage to be part

of their world, in this case that includes the college environment, so if experiences work

against that feeling part of, then adults may decide they do not feel they fit in the college

experience at all.

Kennedy et al. (2000) illustrate the importance of feelings of fit, pointing out that

sometimes it can even compensate for other challenges, as their study found that many

students persisted despite contrary predictions because their feelings of fit with the

institution compensated for (their historical and predicted) poor academic performance.

Granted many factors go into students' expectations regarding what feeling one fits

means to each one, and there is no magic formula for making students feel they fit in the

college environment, one thing frequently in the data was a need to feel respected and

cared about, or more accurately, the students "expected" that from the college.

Relating the Literature to the Categories and Theory

All four of the categories were developed directly from application of grounded

theory methods in collecting and analyzing the data, so it is clear the categories came

from the data. The theory, being constructed from the data analysis to provide an

explanation for the phenomenon of how college experiences influence adult students'

decisions on persistence, then comes from the data as well. It is important to stress,

however, that the categories, and therefore the theory are supported in the literature as

well, as illustrated by a few brief examples.

Importance of Relationships. Astin (1993) found that the college experience

variable having the most impact on educational development was the frequency of

student-student and student-faculty interactions. In 1979, Pascarella and Terenzini

reported that voluntary persistence decisions were significantly related to the frequency

and quality of student-faculty informal, non-classroom contact, and more specific to

doctoral education, Chun-Mei et al., (2007) assert that the student-advisor relationship is

one of its most important aspects, and McGivney (1996) found that many students who

leave college before completing their goals received little or no advice prior to leaving.

Assessment of Value. Barefoot (2004) asserts that the reasons the best students

sometimes leave include boredom, a lack of academic challenge, and general

dissatisfaction. Braxton et al. (2000) asserts that instructor competency was an important

factor, and teaching style was an issue of Feelings of Fit. Kasworm (1990) illuminates

this point as related to adult students with one simple sentence, "Adults do not live apart;

rather, they are a part of their world" (p. 366),

Feelings of fit. This is addressed under areas of interaction above with the same

information applying here as well. Additionally, I believe one of the most informed

perspectives on the importance of feelings of fit was espoused 85 years ago by Eduard

Lindeman (1926) who spoke to the challenge that a lack of flexibility on the part of

colleges could mean to adult students. He stated "Adult learners are precisely those

whose intellectual aspirations are least likely to be aroused by the rigid, uncompromising

requirements of authoritative, conventionalized institutions of learning" (p. 28).

Challenges Encountered. Among the studies that support the need for colleges to

help students with the challenges they face, Miller et al. (2005) assert that students should

rightfully expect colleges will provide services to help them succeed, and Pascarella and

Terenzini (2005) suggest that support services such as tutoring centers are intended to

promote student persistence by helping students with college challenges. While support

services was not found to be a critical area of experience for most students participating

in this study, the data did show an overall lack of awareness of services available.

What's Missing From the Literature?

While the literature provides very useful information on many of the topics

addressed in this study, there is, as McGivney (2004) called it a paucity of research on

adult students, especially the adult students such as the participants in this study between

40 and 65 years old. There is a need to look more closely at these subsets of the adult

student population, and not just the undergraduates or the doctoral students conducting

dissertation research, but everyone in between.

In describing limitations of the Miller et al. (2005) project that examined students'

expectations and compared them with their college experiences, Miller spoke about the

lack of data on adult students. He pointed out in the introduction that there has been little

published about expectations of students over 30 years old or attending college part time,

and in the conclusion he stressed the impact stating, "We found some helpful studies

about the expectations of college students, but far too little about older students, part-time

students, graduate students, married students, students who are parents, and so forth" (p.

252). This missing demographic is clearly represented in the current, completed and non-

completed students participating in this study; a point that adds to its value in expanding

the field of knowledge.

Additionally, more research is warranted on the influence of teaching styles and

course formats has on persistence, as Barefoot (2004) points that area of study has been

woefully ignored. Braxton (2004, 2006) and Tinto (2005) support this need as well, with

both stressing the vital role classrooms have on student persistence.

General Discussion

This study does not attempt to predict how students will react to the discord that may arise between their expectations and their perceptions of their college experiences. Examples in this study alone show that some students who see their college experiences as primarily negative may decide to depart, but others with the same overall view may persist, perhaps influenced by their perspective type such as the Enthusiast, the Finisher, or the Balancer as addressed in Chapter Six. On the other hand, students who consider their experiences as primarily neutral or positive may also persist until completing their degrees, or seemingly inexplicably, they may decide to depart. The challenge is that decisions to persist or depart only have to make sense to one person, the student.

Due to the persistence/departure decision being a personal one that each student makes, often with little explanation being provided, there is no known sure formula to predict persistence or departure. In trying to better understand departure, colleges may never get the full answers, but this study has provided an avenue for discussion, and hopefully that conversation can take place when the student is still in the decision mode, not after the fact. The request to talk about expectations and experiences is a worthwhile beginning to any discussion regarding persistence.

In looking at the potential influence of negative experiences on departure, we should remember that it may not be the degree of negative or positive that matters, as in a big issue, but instead the influence may come in the number of experiences; the cumulative effect as Mike, just months from graduation suggested. Or perhaps the key is in the emotion tied to the type or significance of an experience. Both Becky and Terry spoke of experiences that bothered them greatly, with Becky wondering about the ethics

of faculty, and Terry questioning the integrity of fellow students. There is also Barb, who's decision to depart was definitely based on a challenge that caused great emotion. To the positive side we have Matt, so fond of the relationships college provides that he says he would endure most anything to continue those bonds. In fact, many of the very positive comments made throughout this study were about positive relationships with instructors, faculty, staff, and peers.

This study involved 26 participants, five of whom were non-completed students at the time of interview, meaning they had already left their college programs without completing the degree programs in which they enrolled. It is interesting to note that of the remaining 21 current and/or completed students, all but five reported either having previously left another college program (four participants), having given serious consideration to leaving a program (three participants) or making essentially an "if/then" statement such as, if more classes had been like that one, I would have left; or in the present tense, if classes lose their interest and challenge, I will leave (nine participants).

It was quite interesting to me that in several of the interviews that provided important data, the participant began by telling me they just did not think they would have much to offer my study. Linda was one such example where she opened by telling me she did not think she had anything to share that I would care about, then went on in the first minute of her interview to explain that she had experienced unnecessary obstacles to her joy on her great journey, which speaks to expectations discord, and although she clearly loves college and I count her as an Enthusiast, she also offered some powerful and passionate reactions to experiences where her expectations were not met.

Linda and others in this study are passionate about college but when what they

consider reasonable expectations are not in agreement with their experiences, they are

significantly affected by that. The question of whether or not that discord would

eventually lead to their departure from college is impossible to answer with certainty,

however, it certainly seems that discord has the ability to significantly influence their

perceptions of their college experiences. From that point, it becomes an issue of each

individual's own persistence/departure equation.

Going back to an assertion made in Chapter One, that students departing college

without completing their degrees can adversely influence others who might be

considering attending. If Linda stays in school and her neighbor, co-worker, friend or

relative is thinking about college and asks that she tell them honestly what she thinks, the

emotion of her response may depend on how recent and how severe her last incidence of

expectation discord.

One other example was Karen's case, a very motivating story of a woman who

returned to college after a 39 year absence, and early on in the interview she made clear

she had not had a bad instructor and that every teacher was outstanding and supportive. I

believe Karen was sincere in saying that, but before the interview was over she spoke of

absolutely hating one of only three teaching styles she had been exposed to and stating

that if more classes were like that one, she would walk away.

The challenges are raised to illustrate that the participants tend to have a reticence

towards sharing less than favorable experiences. It is important to note that even with

students who offered emotional details of incidents of expectations discord, none

presented it as a constant or truly malicious activity. Also several participants spoke of

very positive experiences with college faculty staff and peers. Those instances are noted

in this study as well when the data suggests they can influence students' perceptions of their college experiences, such as Elise's story where she directly credited an instructor with her attending graduate school based upon his encouragement and support. Matt's is another such story with his statements that it is the positive relationships with his advisor and faculty that matter most to him.

Some students commented during interviews that the negatives stood out, but others assessed that the more prevalent positives outweighed the negatives. The question and answer remain, "it depends." Adding to the complexity is the fact that some students may be a virtual warehouse of examples of negative experiences, but they persist nevertheless. Those outliers are likely addressed by their perspective as Finishers, or some other reason that promotes persistence. One additional possible explanation is that those students do not truly see their experiences as negatively as they profess.

One of the major motivators for selecting this topic for study was the opportunity to try to understand why two students can share what seems to be the same experiences, but one then decides to depart while the other stays. These findings have finally provided an answer to this question that has long troubled me; their experiences are not the same. Two students sitting in the same classroom, may have vastly different perceptions of their experiences, and therefore, vastly different reactions to those experiences, in large part because they come in with and potentially live each experience with vastly different expectations.

This study identified four categories relating phenomena important to adult students, these are: Importance of Relationships, Assessment of Value, Feelings of Fit, and Challenges Encountered. Each has a sense of emotion attached to it and that

emotion, can be tied to personal expectations. This can be true in any relationship, be it with a teacher, advisor, or peer as discussed here, or a spouse or other family member, in casual relationships or even in meeting total strangers we have some expectations. Perhaps with strangers the only expectation is that they might nod as you pass, but what happens if instead they smile broadly and offer a friendly hello? I am not assuming everyone is a social person, and some might even prefer strangers not look their way on the street, but if the action of the stranger is different than expected, it affects us.

If a nod was expected and not received, it is noted, and if no acknowledgement is expected but is received, that is noted. We all have expectations regarding relationships that will form during our college experiences, and those expectations are what we essentially measure the relationship against. In grounded theory, researchers work with dimensions of properties, and from the data we see that Student's Expectations includes several subcategories including one titled, student/advisor interaction, and under that subcategory is the property of support. The dimensional range for support runs from "on an island" to "you matter to me" meaning students expect advisor to provide support, somewhere in the range between feeling like you're on a deserted island to feeling like you matter to the advisor.

If students do not feel their advisors have any responsibility to provide guidance on college experiences, but instead see the advisor's role is to answer questions when asked, but not actively guide, then the expectation of guidance may be closer to the desert island end of the range. Conversely, other students who rely on their advisors to stay in contact and essentially help keep them on track, then their expectations will run more to the you matter to me end of the range.

In addressing how this matters, one must keep in mind that this study cannot address the extreme margins, for instance students that are such loners that they truly want their advisors to go away and leave them alone, so when they receive emails asking to meet to discuss next semester's classes, they are upset and develop a negative attitude toward their advisors. For more midstream students, who want at least some guidance, they will likely be pleased with the email and move forward with the meeting. Moving more to the "you matter to me" end of the range, if students expect their advisors to call every couple of weeks to give encouragement and ensure they are on the right track, they may think, "Well it's about time my advisor contacted me" and therefore not feel supported, or at least, not supported enough.

Therein lies the challenge, not just for the relationship between students and advisors, but in all relationships, and in all feelings of fit, and all assessments of value. In fact, look again at the scenario, the relationship between students and advisors in the property of guidance.   That scenario does not just apply to relationships, as it clearly has a role in feelings of fit, and how students assess the value of college experiences, and it can even impact on how they view challenges, especially if they view staying abreast of the college administrative requirements a challenge. I am not suggesting something as simple as an email from advisor that meets, does not meet, or exceeds students' expectations will forever color their views, but it at least has a temporary influence, at least for a while it is a factor in their persistence/departure equation.

It is impossible to not notice factors involved in student departure, especially when those factors are related to phenomena recorded in this study. Taking the five non-

completed students and looking just briefly at their circumstances as revealed in their

interviews provides some informative data.

Terry attributes her departure from a funded doctoral program to impossible time

requirements of one mandatory class outside her field of study. In losing Terry, the

college lost a top-performing student who had earned all previous degrees from the same

school. When asked if anything could have kept her in the program she made clear that

talking to someone to look at alternatives might have helped.

Barb, an ABD student who quietly admitted the main reason she left was because

she cannot write well enough; a problem that causes her great embarrassment. This

student, who has seemingly very capable speaking skills had never heard of the speech to

text programs available until I told her about them, and has never looked into getting

college support on her writing. When asked if she would go back and finish if she could

find one person who would protect her feelings but help her she simply replied, "Oh

yeah!" and when asked she was still interested she said, "Yes, it is still something I want.

And you know what, the crazy thing about it is, it's still something that I want" (623-

624). I do not think that is crazy at all.

Becky, another ABD student says she left her program because there just was not

time to do the dissertation. Her story made clear she is indeed a very busy person, but

she also tells of a lack of support for her topic during the course designed to prepare

students for dissertation work. On top of that, Becky admits that her advisor, whom she

speaks very highly of, would expect something much bigger by way of her dissertation

than she has time to do. She further admitted that many others are not held to the same

requirement. The most difficult aspect of this to understand is why I am again the only

person discussing possibilities for completion with her.

      Ray is a young man by this study's standards in that he was 35 when attending

just one semester of a funded doctoral program. He explained he walked away because

he realized it would take too long. I then learned that was partly because the mandatory

seminar he was taking was scheduled across the two time periods most evening classes

were held, starting in the middle of one and ending in the middle of the other.   On top of

that, the seminar was poorly managed and provided no useful knowledge. Ray admitted

that had either situation been resolved he would have probably still been in the program.

      And finally there is Kathy, another funded doctoral student who after getting her

master's degree while taking doctoral courses, left college for many reasons, including

not having the drive anymore, classes beneath the students, and a mismatch on

teaching/learning styles. She added that her advisor was very busy and did not return

emails and during her time spent in the doctoral program she never filled out a degree

plan. I personally wonder if they know she is gone.

      The departure stories of each of these students included some level of

expectations discord, and each presents what I would consider a missed opportunity to

keep them in the school. I assert that each case also illustrates the need for more active

communication between colleges and students at all levels.

      In moving to the conclusions, I first present two central discoveries from the

Miller et al. (2005) book. First, they found that student expectations seem to be an

underutilized aspect of understanding the relationships between students and institutions.

And second, they generally concluded that more accurate communication about the

college experience would be a useful approach in helping students to frame expectations

that are reasonable. These important discoveries, although presented in a book

documenting the study of traditional students attending undergraduate programs, are

clearly echoed in this study.

Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations

In a 2001 Lumina Foundation study, Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Gahn called for

educational systems to extend studies on adult persistence to identify and build structures

within colleges to increase adults' chances for degree completion. In responding to that

call, this study is intended to help with that challenge. One of the key intentions of this

study was to give this student population voice.

Conclusions

This study explored the long-standing problem of college student attrition,

focusing on a very specific subset of the population, adult students between 40 and 65

years old who returned to college after a significant gap in their college attendance. The

purpose of this study was to expand the field of knowledge on how college experiences

influenced these students' decisions to stay in school until earning a degree or to leave

prior to that accomplishment.

In contrast to the majority of research on college student persistence which looks

primarily at traditional students attending undergraduate programs, this study looked

specifically at the 40 to 65 year old subset of the adult student population, and primarily

addressed adult students who had returned to college to pursue graduate degrees. To that

end, 23 of the 26 current, completed and non-completed students participating in this

study were pursuing masters and doctoral degrees. Additionally, in looking at college

departure, this study focused exclusively on those who departed voluntarily as opposed to any form of involuntary dismissal. The aspect most distinguishing this study from others was its exploration of the role college experiences, as perceived by these students, played in their decisions on persistence, with college experiences being defined as the personal involvement in or observation of events that occur as related to college attendance.

This qualitative study used a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) methodology. This involved a comprehensive literature review and detailed analysis of interviews of 26 adult students from three colleges to collect and analyze data regarding the participants' college experiences in five main areas: Business Processes, Support Services, Student/Advisor Interactions, Classroom Environment, and Feelings of Fit. The data was collected via two focus group and 19 one-to-one interviews. The overarching research questions included one primary and five secondary questions with the primary being: "How do college experiences, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions regarding college persistence?" The secondary questions asked the same basic question but each was tailored to focus specifically on one of the five main areas of college experiences.

The major findings of this study included support for the initial assumption that college experiences can influence students' decisions on persistence, with 21 of the 26 participants stating they had either: left a college program, seriously considered leaving a program, or would leave a program if certain experiences they assessed as negative were to continue. Other major findings included the identification of four major categories, complete with their subcategories, properties and dimensions that combined to represent the main ideas in the data revealed as important to the adult students' college

experiences. These categories were: Importance of Relationships, Assessment of Value, Feelings of Fit, and Challenges Encountered.

Analysis of the categories led to the identification of a central category that brought all the data together: Students' Expectations, or as expanded to read, Students' Expectations Influence Persistence. Grounded theory's selective coding was used to bring more utility to this category by constructing a theory that relates all the categories to the issue. The theory, *Adult students' expectations of their college experiences influence their perceptions and assessment of the actual experiences, thereby influencing their decisions to persist in or depart college,* is the heart of this study as it provided explanatory power for what is going on with these adult students. In short it explained that what students make of their college experiences in terms of the quality of the relationships, the assessment of its value, their feelings of fit, and the challenges they encounter, all go into their decisions on persistence. When expectations and experiences do not match, there is *expectations discord*, and that discord can influence students' perceptions of their experiences.

In 1980, Bean asserted that students form perceptions of various objective measures such as class grades or belonging to campus organizations, as well as subjective measures, such as the practical value of the education and the quality of the institution, and he went on to say that those variables influence the degree to which students are satisfied with the school. In discussing this, Bean was talking about expectations. When Tinto (1986, 1993) explained student departure as a longitudinal process that occurs because of the meanings individual students ascribe to their interactions with the formal and informal dimensions of a college, he was describing how students' perceptions

influence their decisions on persistence. Miller et al. (2005) assert that students'

expectations influence their perceptions of their college experiences, and suggest the need

to promote reasonable expectations to better align student and college views of the

college experience. This study combines the assertions of Bean (1980) Tinto (1986,

1993) and Miller et al. (2005), among others, with the findings revealed in this study to

form its overall conclusions.

This study's main conclusion that college experiences influence adult students'

decisions on persistence actually includes four parts: Part 1, students' expectations of

their college experiences appear to influence their perceptions of the actual experiences;

Part 2, those perceptions appear to influence their assessment of the experiences; Part 3,

that assessment is likely factored into students' ongoing persistence/departure equation;

and Part 4, the potential exists for a significant single event or a culmination of smaller

events assessed as negative to influence adult students' to decide to depart college

without completing their degrees.

This conclusion leads to three related conclusions: a) It appears that expectations

discord resulting from the difference in students' expectations and their perceptions of

actual experiences is a major factor in experiences being assessed as negative, b) it is

likely that assessments of experiences as negative influences students' towards departure

in the persistence/departure equation, and c) improved communication between colleges

and students' regarding expectations can reduce the level of expectations discord. In

approaching improved communications, it appears colleges can also benefit from the

knowledge that as illustrated briefly in the discussion on typologies, students also have

varying perspectives towards college that can influence their perceptions and assessment

of their college experiences. This knowledge can help colleges better explore and negotiate students' expectations.

In responding to the primary research question, *How do college experiences, as perceived by adult students, influence their decisions on persistence?,* this study's theory and findings provided answers useful to colleges to explain what phenomena related to college experiences matter to adult students. The benefit of this data is that colleges can better understand the processes in play when students are considering whether to persist or depart, and get insight into what phenomena matter and how. As Kasworm (2005) points out, there is no monolithic adult student, as adults can have common and diverse experiences and beliefs. This study contends that experiences and beliefs are potentially the base upon which expectations are developed.

The topic of persistence has been studied for more than 100 years, but the literature review suggests this is the first study focused solely on this primary research question. The conclusions presented here are supported by the data provided by the 26 participants, who represented current students, ones enrolled in classes at the time of interview; completed students, ones who had completed their degrees within the past two years; and non-completed students, ones who had made the voluntary decision to depart without completing the degree they were seeking. They were merely asked to share their experiences as adult students, and that is just what they did. This sharing and the related analysis of the data added to the body of knowledge on adult students. It is hoped this study's findings will reduce what Lovitt's (2001) called the "invisible problem" (p. 1) by adding some clarity into the issues facing adult graduate students.

Limitations of the Study

I think the most significant limitation of this study was that only five of the 26 participants were non-completed students. I would have preferred a few more just to gather more data on students who actually decided to leave but despite repeated and creative efforts to find more I could not. The challenge was in some ways symptomatic of the research problem, in that when adult students leave college, they are often lost to the college. I talked with professors, staff in the graduate office, and even appealed to a large group via social networking sites, but although several people said they knew of students who left their programs (often using the term, disappeared), they no longer knew how to reach them, once again illustrating Lovitts (2001) point about graduate students being part of an "invisible problem" (p. 1) referring to graduate programs where the students leave quietly, silent about their reasons, and no one asking them why they left.

During the study, I learned that in addition to the five non-completers, four additional participants had previously left some other college program so their experiences expanded the knowledge base. I do not believe this limitation hurt the study, however, as the non-completed participants provided very similar data to all the other participants; the others who had previously left programs, considered leaving, would leave if…, and even those who stated they had never considered leaving short of achieving their goals.

Additionally, I would have preferred more undergraduate students, but the three participating in this study provided very similar input and perspectives to the other 23 participants. That said, having only three still limited the knowledge base on undergraduates in this study.

Another limitation was the ratio of men to women, as the women far outnumbered the men in this study. I would also have preferred more men and women of color in the study, but the recruiting efforts were difficult with all students, not just in finding non-completed students. While I did eventually have more volunteers than I needed to use in the study, it would have been beneficial to provide more diversity in the sample population. This is also true for the area of study, as the vast majority of participants are in the field of Education. While this may be seen as too narrow for some, I actually think the focus in the education area resulted in a sample population that is more in tune with their role as students. And finally, despite being very pleased with the data I gathered from the five telephonic and one computer based interview, I did miss out on the ability to note non-verbal cues that in-person interviews provide. While I would have preferred all interviews be in person, I am confident I received valuable data in every interview.

Recommendations for Future Research

I expect one cannot conduct research without at least occasionally wondering about other related topics, and that definitely occurred with me. I would suggest that future research look specifically at the influence of expectations on student satisfaction and persistence. As satisfaction is such a subjective term, I recommend that be explored quantitatively where participants record their levels of satisfaction in various areas on a Likert scale or some similar means. I would also suggest that future research more extensively explore some of the issues raised in this study, perhaps taking the four categories and doing a study on each of them.

Another area of research I believe would be very beneficial is to look more closely at what makes student and advisor relationships successful, with successful being

related at least in large part to students completing their degrees. Much of the existing

literature focuses on factors described earlier that relate to close relationships, but as

explained here, two of the non-completed students had what they would definitely call

close relationships. I suggest that in studying students who either left and then returned

or at least persisted despite significant challenges, researchers would find valuable data.

As discussed in the limitations of this study, there is a need for more research on

adult students that includes students at all levels, not just undergraduates or graduates.

As such I would recommend a study on adult students that looked more evenly across

college levels, looking to identify what different factors influence the persistence of

students based on their level of study.

I would also recommend that future researchers consider studying the influence of

student typologies on adult student persistence. Exploring how various student types

influence and/or represent students' perspectives could provide valuable insight into

understanding and negotiating students' expectations.

Finally, if researchers explore any of the topics listed above, they would do well

to include the perspectives of college instructors, advisors, and staff in their study. This

is important because as the findings demonstrate, these are not unilateral issues, but ones

that affect all parties, and as such, the expectations and perspective of all parties play an

important role in influencing college experiences.

Closing Thoughts

I have been a student for so much of my life that I jokingly said I could just

interview myself 20 or 30 times to get different thoughts on the adult student experience.

As it turns out, I did not put a single personal experience into this study but I did not need

to, as the experiences of the 26 current, completed and non-completed students who

participated in this study did it for me. I have come to realize that students' experiences

in College A are quite similar to the experiences of students in College B and to the

experiences of the one student from College C. I have also realized that there is little

difference in the experiences of the 40 year old student and the 65 year old one, though

the two are considered a generation apart.

Throughout this study I heard two recurring themes regarding what mattered to

students, and I heard this from almost every participant in one form or another. First, the

students want the learning to matter. In most cases this referred to learning being

useable, as they wanted to be able to take the knowledge and apply it, but in other

instances it just seemed to mean that they wanted the instructor to really care about the

topic, to know it, to believe it, and to share it with sincerity and passion.

The second recurring theme throughout this study is that the students want to

matter to the college. This does not seem to be an issue of popularity or special

treatment, just one of being recognized as important to the college. It seems that in

describing what made participants love a class, they were also describing what made

them feel the instructor cared about them. This included simple things like instructors

showing passion for the subject and sharing that with the students, being available to talk

outside the class, offering words of encouragement, and being responsive and respectful.

How students evaluate their own value to a college may differ from student to student,

but the analysis suggests this need can be satisfied by almost anyone in the college; an

instructor, advisor, or staff member, or best of all, all three.

Knowing that one matters to a college seems a reasonable request (or perhaps an expectation) the students levy on colleges, after-all, there would be no need for colleges if there were no students. As the literature and findings make clear, advisors play a major role in helping students endure rough patches of the college experience. This does not necessarily mean some elaborate display of support, in fact, as Strauss and Corbin (1998) state, "Sometimes, students are insecure and just need reassurance that they are on the right path" (p. 148).

This study asserts that the discord between students' expectations and their view of their experiences can influence their decisions on persistence. As I've argued, the problems associated with this issue can be reduced through the open discussion of all parties' expectations, for it is only through this communication that the parties can better understand each others' needs. This sort of discussion can help avoid some of the issues this study has revealed.

In Terry's story she stated, "If the selection process requires, in order to get a PhD, you have to be able to put everybody else's needs aside in order for you to focus to get this terminal degree, I'd never do it, I'd never be able to do it, I cannot" (351-354). I agree with Terry, I cannot and would not do that either. Yes, I have had to sacrifice time with family and friends, this has been a challenging process, in part because high-level education demands dedicated action, but I have never felt I had to put everybody else's needs aside nor do I feel that is the attitude of doctoral advisors, but when I asked Terry about advisors comments on her views in that area, she told me they said they understood her feelings. I must admit that I do not, and by that I do not mean I cannot understand why Terry would decide to depart if she truly felt persistence would force her to put

everybody else's needs aside. Instead, I do not understand why she should believe that is required, and I am concerned that "the system" is helping perpetuate such myths.

As I reviewed other dissertations in preparation for my own, I was struck by some of the comments in the acknowledgement sections, folks thanking family members for letting them check out of their roles as wife and mother, or husband and father; thanking people for seeing them through the horrible times; holding them up when all seemed dark around them, and many other terribly concerning comments. Even the text we used in the course preparing students for the dissertation journey included questions about how much we were willing to sacrifice, stating that "self-denial is the name of the game" (Roberts, 2004, p. 4), how much we are willing to endure with the opening sentence of "The path is fraught with difficulties and obstacles" (p. 6).

I remember in reading these now almost two years ago that I thought just as Terry did above, that I would never do it, I cannot, and I stand by that perspective. I have worked untold hours on this, have sacrificed tons of personal time, ridiculous hours of sleep, but I still found time for my family, not the same time, but moments that mattered. I have not been as attentive or perhaps even loving, but I did not put aside everybody else's needs, I just found a way to break other responsibilities, needs, and desires into smaller pieces so I did not lose myself of others in this time. And here is the key point, if I commented to an instructor or my advisor, or any college staff that I was so involved in any school work that I was losing myself, I would expect that person to sit me down and try to help me recover a healthy focus. No degree is worth losing self or others over.

To me that is quite simply a matter of expectations that need discussing and managing. In the editing of my first draft of this dissertation I spent five hours on the

phone with my methodology advisor, and easily spent nearly 25 times that in making the

edits. I did not expect it to take so long, but more importantly, I did not believe I had

only two choices, spend the time or quit, as I knew there were alternatives but apparently

Terry did not. I return you to her answer to my question about what could have kept her

in school, she said, "What a great question!, I mean that's a really good question!" (851)

and after thinking for several seconds she answered,

> Maybe the opportunity to really talk about the real issues, like [pause] this is an
>
> impediment, I don't know how to get around it [pause] and, that was to be able to
>
> even be able to talk to somebody about, um, what the impediments were. That
>
> would have probably been really significant, because I did not see any way
>
> around it. (852-856)

Terry's answer highlights why I wanted to do this study, and her answer

illustrates as well as any comment in these many pages how important college

experiences are in influencing adult students' decisions on persistence, but merely having

a better understanding of this will do no good without action. Terry's initial response to

my question proves that; she says, "What a great question!, I mean that's a really good

question!" (851) then goes on to provide an answer that most capable advisors could have

helped with, but to my point on action. Terry would not have been so animated in her

original response had I been the second or third person to ask her the question, or more

importantly, a version that might have made a difference if asked in the present tense,

"Terry, what can keep you in this program?"

Miller (2005) closes the project of examining students' expectations and

comparing with the realities of the student experience with these thoughts:

The relationship between students and colleges has two sides, and each has

expectations of the other—some reasonable, some not, some clearly articulated,

some not. This project leaves us with a clear understanding that student

expectations play an important part in students' relationships with institutions.

Colleges should study those expectations and use them to inform practice,

whether it takes the form of improving performance or of informing students

about what is reasonable and negotiating adjusted expectations. We hope for

more discourse on the subject and urge colleges to take student expectations

seriously. (pp. 252-253)

I am hopeful this study has provided a useful addition to the discourse, and that it has

enabled a better understanding of how students' expectations of their college experiences

influence their perceptions of the actual experiences, and those perceptions influence

their decisions on persistence.

This study left me with the opinion that at least two of the non-completed doctoral

students in this study saw college, especially the pursuit of a doctorate, as too high a price

to pay, and did so at least in part due to their expectations not matching their perceptions

of their actual experiences. Most importantly, I believe that in each case, an open

discussion of expectations between the students and the colleges could have reduced the

level of discord and perhaps avoided those students' departure.

Whether I am right or wrong about the individual cases, the data show that all of

the participants' experienced some level of discord between their expectations and their

perceptions of their actual experiences. This discord, occurring at varying levels, led 21

of the 26 participants to either leave a college program, seriously consider leaving, or to

at least issue an if/then statement that essentially, if the discord continued, then they would leave. This study, therefore has shown that there is a definite need for colleges to engage students in an open and ongoing discussion about expectations. Until that sort of discussion takes place, my *expectation* is that the books written 50 years from now will be saying the same things books written 50 years ago said about the departure puzzle; that we still have not have figured it out.

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Appendix A
Open Coding All

FG-A Rick, Siena, Matt, Mia, Raylie

CUSTOMER SERVICE (+ & -)

FRUSTRATION x x

TIME requirements

RELATIONSHIPS (w profs)

expectations – faculty

reason I'm here

makes allowances

academic experiences matter

contentment (very happy)

dislike fund raising calls

frustration if service is bad

goal driven

WORTH the effort

stubbornness

perseverance

challenges didn't matter

respect for school hurt

not quitting

incompetent staff

saving grace employee

relationship trumps errors

appreciates library staff

easy access via website

reliance on peers

lack of awareness (what's avail)

technology appreciation

missing support (café closed)

FG-A:, cont:

instructor

(talent/engagement/ knowledge poor)

offended - awful

school lack of accountability

waste of money

waste of time x x

negatives stand out

expectations – disappointment

academic validity (beneath lvl)

dislike busy work

value of engaged peers!

adult perspective on value

challenging classes

adult experiences matter

FOCUS on learning now

reason for returning

higher expectations

desires in learning (want interesting, intriguing)

personal goals

AGE and prof relationships

grade focus different

no time to waste x x

anger at poor instruction

sacrifices

class management matters

appreciate tech savvy prof

want challenge

FG-A: cont:

want peer ACCOUNTABILITY

expectations raise level

relationship with faculty

acquiescence to some bad

fit with prof most important

intellectual disagreement okay

other adults matters

peer non-engagement ruins cls

Professor role

online classes terrible

college reputation

lack of life credit

happenstance advisor connection

poor advising – advising is key

ADVISOR influence ! !

FG2: Justin , Rayleen, Shannon, Michele

RESPECT x

Different age students

meets needs

ease of access (no GRE)

time

MONEY

past tests to get in

approach class seriously

do extra readings

RESPECT AS ADULT (got her in)

never met advisor in person

FG-B: Justin , Rayleen, Shannon, Michele, cont:	**FG-B: Justin , Rayleen, Shannon, Michele**	**William, cont:**
Advisor not savvy	peer DEDICATION	Hoop jumping to fix mix-up
poor **advisor** advice (out of touch)	respect for each other	Admission simple
lack of respectful treatment	**total respect**	Advisor relationships
advisor adds no value	peer bonding opportunities	Advisor supportive
advisor with pulse on industry	adult learner experience	Good advisor matchup
advisor very busy	my $2000 this time	Advisor is respectful of exper
online is too impersonal	immediate value	Adult focused
dud class – instructor checked out	long-term value	Good relationship
lack of feedback	learning fit goals	Support is awesome
class management (talkers)	personal motivation	Advisor matchup process –
semicircle in class	want tie to lrng objectives	College works with me
more discussion	non-supportive teacher	Positives offset negatives
CLASSROOM SETTING	relevancy matters	Age & attitude matter
(desks like elementary school)	reliability – no changes	EXPECTATIONS
interaction in class (good)	syllabi important	RESPECT
collecting a paycheck	stimulating	Reliability
motivated, want the degree	active learning +	RELATIONSHIPS
might "suck it up" if bad	invested teacher	Knowledgeable
other commitments	self-motivation responsibility	TREATMENT
pressure, good pressure	law of diminishing returns	FRUSTRATION
family support	learning to understand not gain	ATTITUDE
REASON FOR LEARNING now	illogical classes required	CLASS MANAGEMENT
maturity	zero-meaning class topics	Evaluation
deal with stress – wonder why	NEW TECHNIQUE – POTENTIAL	Measurement techniques
personal learning	CATEGORY HEADINGS	CHALLENGE
nervous about age		Level of work
COLLABORATIVE classrooms +		Applying knowledge
instructor promotes collab +	**WILLIAM INTERVIEW**	TEACHING STYLE
	Left a school due to politics	(online made him angry)
	Registration confusion	MOTIVATION
		FRUSTRATION (Peer)

WILLIAM cont:

RIGOR

Content vs. understanding

Disappointment

Self-motivation

Application

Standards

Busy work

MOTIVATION KILLS

COST

VALUE

GOALS

Enjoyment

Coping

Self-directed learning

Desks worthless

ACCOMMODATIONS

SUPPORT (adult)

CLASSROOM ARRANGEMENT

ADVISOR RELATIONSHIP

SHARED RESPECT

TREATED LIKE GRAD STUDENT

FEELINGS OF FIT (aspects of)

Support group (or none)

Fit with peers

Common interests

Assessment methods

Peer attitudes

Mandatory Classes

Instructor Role

Guidance

Satisfaction

Engagement

UNDERSTANDING

ADULT RESPECT

ROBIN INTERVIEW

Hazing process

better student older

FEELINGS OF FIT

(didn't fit at prvt school)

(age, part-time, non-foreign)

 (religious focus)

RIGOR matters

INSTRUCTOR INFLUENCE

APPLICATION of learning

dislikes dumbed down

poor teacher knowledge

poor teacher presence

COST

VALUE

only Comm Coll teacher in

class

less reserved as RAS

CLASSROOM SETTING

(Didn't fit in the desks)

(no plug-in for laptops)

Writing requirements

ADVISOR ROLE

(have to find own advisor)

juggling life – need flexibility

ADVISOR/STUDENT MATCH

advisor ratings by students

responsiveness

ROBIN cont:

reactive vs. proactive

relationship

SUPPORT SERVICES –

AWARENESS

(no knowledge of email

account)

instructor effort +

accommodating professor +

timing of classes tough

Exceeded EXPECTATIONS +

Wasting money on poor

classes

CHALLENGE good

pulling more from students

constructive criticism

chance to correct/improve

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

effort with no reward

no teacher feedback

non-responsive to queries

confused in class

COST VS REWARD

SACRIFICES

selfishness

family support

CONFLICTING RESPONSIBILITY

unawareness of challenges?

technologically challenged

Understanding business rules

LINDA INTERVIEW:

unnecessary obstacles to joy

FRUSTRATION

Don't use support services

professor availability +

FEELINGS OF FIT +

acceptance of younger

students +

younger student

competitiveness

feel lucky to be back in school

college is home

good classes are SO good

not all are good

INSTRUCTOR ROLE

put effort into teaching

show respect

FRUSTRATION

Keep knowledge fresh

don't read slides

AGE

instructor technique and effort

COST – VALUE

ADVISOR Support

Research vs. Students

challenge

COMPETING RESPONSIBILITIES

(family)

SUPPORT Peers –

Challenge to perseverance

AGE makes difference on focus

CONTENT

LINDA cont:

(wants classes to open her

eyes)

INSTRUCTOR ROLE

poor instructor = poor class

attitude matters

VALUE OF TIME

poor preparation

poor feedback

waste of time

EXPECTATIONS

RESPECT

MISUNDERSTOOD

EXPECTATIONS

FRUSTRATION

AGE PERSPECTIVE

challenge my thinking +

BARB INTERVIEW:

CARING

easy business processes

tedious business processes

Need Money

SUPPORT SERVICES

(what financial aid is available)

lack of clear information

ADVISOR RELATIONSHIP

(encouraging, helping, soft or

firm as needed - genuine

concern)

CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES

RESPECT for adults

BARB cont:

INSTRUCTOR ROLE

non-supportive professor

PAID FOR IT (check earlier for

this)

ATTITUDE (I was really trying)

ATTITUDE (why are your

teaching)

non-supportive teacher

RESPECT (non-respect)

learn by doing, not reading

Self-persistence

REQUIREMENTS

(fear of writing the

dissertation)

TIME CONSTRAINTS (a lie)

embarrassment at weakness

needs pushing, guidance

loves instructor engagement

own opinion sought +

no direction or assistance -

CHALLENGE

SUPPORT

uncertainty

KATHY INTERVIEW:

Money – free schooling

LEARNING

no oversight

ADVISOR Selection

FRUSTRATION (busy work)

KATHY cont:

COMPETING PRIORITIES

(family illness – new beau)

APPLICATION

USEFULNESS

COST VS BENEFIT

TIME AND EFFORT

no questions needing answers

VALUE (no one cared)

CARING

APPRECIATION

FEELINGS OF FIT

(professors out of touch)

USEFULNESS

DISCUSSION

LEARNING style

TEACHING technique

VALUE

class description mismatch

EXPECTATIONS (mismatch)

forced group work

peer mismatch

ADVISOR support

no awareness of supt svcs

LEVEL OF LEARNING

MOTIVATION – GOAL

ADVISOR role in goals

TERRY INTERVIEW:

Different approach than

others

shocked at lack of fit

TERRY cont:

very theoretical

going through hoops

not tied to goals

energy vs. result

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

VALUE OF TIME

COMPETING PRIORITIES

FRUSTRATION

MISMATCHED GOALS

Loved seminar, not others

Don't need PhD

Requirements hurt teaching

incomplete without doctorate

mindset change needed

COST VS REWARD

Encouraged to apply to prgm

Prgm sounded awesome

Supported by peers

FEELINGS OF FIT (unnerved by

others who wanted title)

SACRIFICE

worry about price you pay

energy expenditure

Misuse of valuable time

VALUE

loves collegiality

disappointed in some peers

questioned authenticity

challenge to core values

unwilling to change

selfish sacrifices

TERRY cont:

EXPECTATIONS

FALSE PROMISES

no awareness of student

services

FEELINGS OF FIT (felt stupid)

Boulder on the path

shocked

BUSINESS PROCESSES

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

love open dialogue

lectures are brutally awful

Person, not Number

RESPECT

see me as competent learner

see me as confident individual

loved the sharing

ADVISOR ROLE

(no discussion of alternatives)

RICK INTERVIEW:

loved seminars for

collaboration

FRUSTRATION

BUS PROCESSES & ADVISOR

ROLE

awareness of rules

(took too many courses)

no degree plan

no advice on courses

no advisor until committee

select

RICK cont:

wasted time and money

FEELINGS OF FIT

(CISTL supt group helped)

CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES

anger at instructor's attitude

enjoyed peer interaction

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

(did not keep control)

INSTRUCTOR ROLE

(excited, interested)

TEACHING STYLE/SKILLS

(poor teaching skills)

CLASSROOM ARRANGEMENT

desks in circles aid discussion

MIKE INTERVIEW:

FEELINGS OF FIT

school is fulltime focused

bit overwhelming for part

timers

SUPPORT SVCS & BUS

PROCESSES

(not convenient, parking

passes)

seems very large school

feel like outsider

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

not too rigorous

rectangular set up table +

(permits interaction)

MIKE INTERVIEW Cont:

INSTRUCTOR ROLE

(practice andragogy)

no exemplary professors

professors too busy

FRUSTRATION

(things fall through cracks)

small things prevent

graduation

encouraging – pats on back

ADVISOR ROLE

(non-responsive, no useful

feedback)

CHALLENGED +

ADVISOR as advocate +

single point of failure

BUSINESS PROCESSES –

4-weeks for IRB approval –

unclear guidance

poor college collaboration

CLASSROOM

love learning

developed friendships

challenge by peers

challenged peers

INSTRUCTOR ROLE

(energetic, excited,

competent) +

CHALLENGING

disappointed some not

challenge

rigor

MIKE INTERVIEW Cont:

RESPECTs opinions

instructor has humility

questioned fit in poor classes

needs sense of

accomplishment

COST VS REWARD

hard work is rewarding

want it to mean something

some bad examples

SATISFACTION

EXPECTATIONS/ASSUMPTIONS

Assumed rigor – C for rigor

Andragogy

part-time student treatment

considered quitting

shame of quitting

SUPPORT of others

COMPETING OBLIGATIONS

COMPETING PRIORITIES

REASON FOR RETURNING

STUDENT ABILITY

ACCOUNTABILITY

(student & professor)

BECKY INTERVIEW 1

EXPECTATIONS – self x

expectations - advisor

expectations - reasonability

application of learning

VALUE

USEFULNESS xx

BECKY 1 cont:	BECKY SECOND INTERVIEW:	CISSY cont:
reason for returning	Not supported by leaders	Class sequencing challenges
return on investment	Negative challenged	Poor climate control in classes
COMPETING PRIORITIES x	ADVISOR ROLE	"do you dare to care?"
viability of completion	(supported some ways)	INSTRUCTOR ROLE
ease vs. stringency	(did not guide in system)	Experience adds credibility
opportunity	(no help on forms)	Using technology helps classes
commitment	Only self to blame	Involved instructors +
instructor dedication	Unsure on advisor	Good want you to get it
hoop jumping	responsibility	Want you to learn
requirements, view of	Disillusioned by committee	Put learning ahead of grades
standards – own	mbr	TEACHING SKILL
meaningful	Non-supported by teacher	Non supportive attitude
motivation - self	Questioned integrity of	Student age – can't be fooled
pride – self	teacher	Lazy instructors
time commitment	Unwilling to spend time on	Poor financial office supt
SACRIFICE	Diss	Student is tired of fighting
SUPPORT xx (deserved)	FRUSTRATED	time on problems vs. learning
FIT	College has a role in non-comp	poor inter-office
attitude	Jump through hoops	communication
validity / genuineness /	Practitioner not supported	inefficient systems
integrity	Too little time	good education = useable skills
self-image	Higher priorities	RETURN ON INVESTMENT
loyalty		Doesn't prepare you for work
sharing		focus on degree vs. learning
CHALLENGE	CISSY INTERVIEW:	online weakness – anyone can
RESPECT x	Concern about attitude	represent the student
professionalism	Lack of caring	
harder for fulltime students	School's elitist attitude	
professional engagement	Phenomenal instructors	JENNI INTERVIEW:
	VALUE	Online courses poor
	Would drop if paying on own	No instructor involvement
	Poor responsiveness to calls	ADVISOR ROLE

JENNI cont:

suggested masters vs. 2nd bach

FEELINGS OF FIT

(looking out for me)

SUPPORT SVCS

(staff is flexible, enrolled late)

Unnecessary admission rqmts

Flexible with program change

Supportive but reactive advisor

Not sure what advisor should do

Mechanical degree plan build

No advisor interaction

Capstone advisor unclear selection

Bus Proc are easy, done online

Instructor seemed bored

Rote work

Frequent early release

EXPECTATIONS

Demanding courses

Higher student expectations

CARING

Care about teaching

Passionate

Love the material

Makes you want to learn

Low expectations - would have left

Here to learn

Socialization

JENNI cont:

Fits in due to variety on site

Resented pressure to use labs

Useful website for new students

Student handbook but no 1-on-1

Forced computer literacy

Classes to help literacy

Orientation available online

SUPPORT SERVICES

Grad Writing course – no grades

Desks are small

Combine 2 desks to make one

Not comfortable

Immobile desks bad

Small classrooms

Physical setting hurt participation

Participation is part of grade

FRUSTRATION

INSTRUCTOR ROLE

Want them engaged

Don't preach from syllabus

APPLICABILITY

Teach how to apply it

Dislike no content work

Like constructive feedback

Likes challenge

School flexibility kept her in

JENNI cont:

Older students know who they are

INSTRUCTOR EXPERIENCE

Wants to be treated as adult

Adult expectations different

FRUSTRATIONS – impact if paying

Easy classes not rewarding

Dislikes lecture

Dislikes reading slides

Content over delivery

CHARLA INTERVIEW:

School status matters

tough working fulltime

not finishing felt bad

wanted more knowledge

fill huge void in life

BUS PROC

accepted old classes

otherwise online courses

online not quality educ

easy registration

felt in control

doesn't like design own program

wants more structure

tell me what I need

ADVISOR SUPPORT

(help plan my program)

assigned after seeking help

CHARLA Cont:

advisor transition poor

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

FEELINGS OF FIT

(achievements acknowledged)

(encourages celebration)

one of the older students

always feel welcome

INSTRUCTOR ROLE

won't allow subpar

performance

sympathetic, empathetic

Very supportive

understand students

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

desks bolted to floor

too small for working

dislikes groups –

nonparticipants

grade on own work

TEACHING STYLES

great instructors know

material

want student participation

pull you into class

vary teaching methods

values opinion sought

dislike inflexible teachers

as adult, looking for

APPLICATION

lack of instructor info

mad at no info on teachers

CHARLA Cont:

almost dropped class

poor teacher behavior

not very effective

EXPECTATIONS

grad school grueling

no idea so much writing

non-standard grading tough

CLASS MANAGEMENT

raises hand but stepped on

ELISE INTERVIEW:

 ADVISOR helpful &

encouraging

felt nervous & out of place

very hard worker

peers very accepting

FRUSTRATION

poor advice – retake classes

FEELINGS OF FIT & BUS PROC

did not fit in w age 20 campers

Publicly embarrassed by prof

very discouraging

BUS PROC & SUPT SVCS

technology challenged

enrollment

error – not enrolled

INSTRUCTOR ROLE

encouraged masters quest

prodded and encouraged her

ADVISORS – very helpful

made me feel included

ELISE cont:

student effort = advisor supt

out of their way

CLASSROOM

moveable chairs good

smaller classes = more

connection

RELATIONSHIPS

almost familial relationships

couldn't mentally reach

teacher

dedicated to helping students

interest in students

RESPECT

prefer hard classes – challenge

self

wanted it to mean something

self-important prof, poor

teacher

much more determined as

adult

felt on a mission to graduate

instructs can discourage

students didn't want to die

w/out degree

ANGIE INTERVIEW:

Finisher

Won't waste her money

Degree expands resume

Poor knowledge advisor

Wants challenge

ANGIE cont:

Organization

Interaction with instructor

Not much interaction w

advisor

Concerned about future

Not challenging, why bother

VALUE

(degree rqmts changing)

LAURA INTERVIEW:

Very busy advisor

age group priorities

comfort with own age group

phenomenal facilities

questions encouraged

feedback clear and prompt

challenging = rewarding

relationships important

content most important

USEFULNESS

Caring Instructors matter

No caring = no content

Advisor caring trumps busy

Info on support services

DEE INTERVIEW:

Problematic enrollment

Administrivia

Distracted advisor hurt

Retook entire internship

DEE Cont:

Job security motivation

Common age with peers

Common focus (teacher)

Clear EXPECTATIONS

STUDENT ATTITUDE

MIA INTERVIEW:

ADVISOR non-responsive

Disheartening

Felt angry and disappointed

Provided pat on the back

(good writer)

Others get more interaction

She meets 1 – 2 times a year

No value internship w advisor

Prefers more engagement

FRUSTRATED

Questions continuing

No contact lately

No committee passion

Some professors waste of time

INSTRUCTOR Positives

High expectations

Prepared

New technologies

Keeps it fresh

KAREN INTERVIEW:

enrolling a technological

challenge

once learned, easy

KAREN cont:

multiple passwords required

not intuitive to senior adult

started off scared to death

no sure expectations

first year struggles

need better advice on class

order

poor guidance from counselor

no advisor assigned

no personal assistance

mentor helped confidence

age concerns – acceptance

wide classmate acceptance

age is a plus in classes

supportive teachers

work products vice tests +

TEACHING STYLE (loved 2 of 3)

off-topic discussions

love facilitators

open discussion on topic

CLASS MANAGEMENT

Keep class on track

uncomfortable in some classes

hated one style

blamed herself

would quit if common

WANT TO LEARN

grade means nothing

peer motivation – paper

there to learn

poor management upsetting

KAREN cont:

feels upset

learning intrinsic to nature

quitting killed me

no online, needs interaction

CLASS ENVIRONMENT

bad chairs

circles allow equality

immovable desks hurt socially

SUPPORT SVCS

Need flex times for adult students

RAY INTERVIEW:

Poor scheduling

Conflicting priorities

Felt foolish to leave

No ROI, Didn't need PhD

NEED

Mandatory class unrewarding

Did not feel he fit there

EXPECTATIONS murky

No ADVISOR assigned

Scheduling was irritating

Good class if he learns

Help be a better teacher Irrelevant discussions

VALUE

Appendix B

Potential Categories, April 29, 2011

Business Processes/Support Services/Classroom Environment/Student/Advisor Inter/Feelings of Fit/Misc

ABILITY	COSTS VS BENEFIT	PASSION
ACCEPTANCE	CUSTOMER SERVICE	PEER INFLUENCE
ACCOMMODATION	DEDICATION	RELATIONSHIPS
ACCOUNTABILITY	DISAPPOINTMENT	RELEVANCY
ADULT PERSPECTIVE	EFFICIENCY	RELIABILITY
ADVICE	EFFORT	REQUIREMENTS
ADVISOR INFLUENCE	ENCOURAGEMENT	RESPECT
AGE	ENGAGEMENT	RESPONSIVENESS
APPLICATION OF LEARNING	ENJOYMENT	RETURN ON INVESTMENT
APPRECIATION	EXPECTATIONS	REWARD
ATTITUDE	EXPERIENCE	RIGOR
AUTHENTICITY	FIT	ROADBLOCKS
AVAILABILITY	FLEXIBILITY	SACRIFICE
AWARENESS	FRUSTRATION	SCHEDULING
CARING	GOALS	SELFISHNESS
CHALLENGE	GRADES	SHARING
CLASS MANAGEMENT	GUIDANCE	SOCIALIZATION
CLASSROOM	HOOP JUMPING	STAFF INFLUENCE
COLLABORATION	HOW ASSESSED	STANDARDS
COMMITMENT	INDIVIDUALITY	SUPPORT
COMMON PURPOSE	INSTRUCTOR INFLUENCE	TEACHING STYLE
COMMUNICATION	INTERACTION	TECHNOLOGY
COMPETENCY	KNOWLEDGE	TIME
COMPETING COMMITMENTS	LEARNING STYLE	TREATMENT
COMPETING PRIORITIES	LEVEL OF LEARNING	UNCERTAINTY
CONFLICTING	LOVE OF LEARNING	UNDERSTANDING
RESPONSIBILITIES	LOVE OF TEACHING	USEFULNESS
CONFLICTS	MANDATORY CLASSES	VALUE
CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK	MATCH	89 plus 6 headings = 95
CONTENT	MISUNDERSTANDINGS	
COSTS	NEED	

Appendix C

Categories, Subcategories, Properties, Dimensions

CATEGORY: Importance of Relationships

SUBCATEGORIES: Student/Instructor; Student/Advisor; Student/Peer; Student/College

Student/Instructor & Student/Advisor

PROPERTY:	DIMENSION:
P: adult perspective	D: student is a student -to- opinion valued
P: advice	D: on your own -to- cares about result
P: attitude	D: just a job -to- students matter
P: authenticity	D: shallow -to- sincere
P: availability	D: email me -to- just drop by
P: caring	D: just a number -to- really matter
P: commitment	D: in my class? -to- every student matters
P: communication	D: check your email -to- let's talk
P: dedication	D: just a job -to- job one
P: encouragement	D: no emotion -to- pump you up
P: engagement	D: impersonal -to- personally involved
P: flexibility	D: inflexible -to- considerate of situation
P: guidance	D: find own way -to- helpful planner
P: interaction	D: non-existent -to- personally involved
P: love of learning	D: grade focused -to- love to learn
P: love of teaching	D: isn't this over -to- it's over already?
P: motivation	D: collecting paycheck -to- help students
P: passion	D: reads the slides -to- keeps it fresh and alive
P: reliability	D: unreliable -to- can be counted on
P: respect	D: impersonal -to- mutual respect
P: responsiveness	D: overlooked -to- let's talk about…
P: sharing	D: private -to- collaborative
P: support	D: on an island -to- you matter to me
P: understanding	D: no empathy -to- let's talk about it

Student/Peer

PROPERTY:	DIMENSION:
P: adult perspective	D: just an old guy? -to- what do you think?
P: attitude	D: do my own thing -to- in this together
P: authenticity	D: shallow -to- sincere
P: encouragement	D: too bad for you -to- you can do it
P: engagement	D: busy texting -to- call on me
P: interaction	D: non-existent -to- personally involved
P: love of learning	D: grade focused -to- love to learn
P: motivation	D: get a grade -to- here to learn
P: reliability	D: where is he? -to- good team member
P: sharing	D: sorry, I'm texting -to- collaborative

CATEGORY: Relationships (continued)

Student/College
PROPERTY: DIMENSION:
P: adult perspective   D: do's & don'ts -to- let's find a way
P: attitude   D: it's a business -to- here for students
P: availability   D: open 8 to 4 -to- adult friendly hours
P: cared about   D: just a number -to- really matter
P: dedication   D: dropping? okay -to- retention focused
P: interaction   D: non-existent -to- personally involved
P: motivation   D: take a number -to- glad you're here
P: responsiveness   D: overlooked -to- let's talk about…

CATEGORY: Feelings of Fit

SUBCATEGORIES: Student/Instructor, Student/Advisor, Student/Peer, Student/College

All Subcategories
PROPERTY: DIMENSION:
P: acceptance   D: feel like outsider -to- totally accepted/welcomed
P: age comfort   D: stood out -to- no age among us
P: awareness   D: what do you need -to- let me tell you about…
P: classroom layout   D: fourth grade desks -to- adult learning environment
P: common purpose   D: on your own -to- all in this together
P: enjoyment   D: needles in my eyes -to- phenomenal class
P: experience   D: not recognized -to- valued and highlighted
P: goals   D: unimportant -to- goals supported
P: individuality   D: a student is a student -to- uniqueness respected
P: learning style   D: just tell me what I need -to- challenge me
P: requirements   D: busy work or extreme -to- challenging but reasonable
P: socialization   D: no connection -to- socialize outside of class
P: teaching style   D: reading the next slide -to- facilitative learning
P: treatment   D: jerked around -to- treated as an adult

CATEGORY: Assessment of Value

Subcategories: Return on Investment (Time, Money, Energy); Application of Learning; Love of Learning

All Subcategories
PROPERTY:	DIMENSION:
P: accountability	D: how do you keep this job -to- student feedback counts
P: class management	D: utter chaos -to- expert facilitation
P: collaboration	D: to each his own -to- there's power in sharing
P: competency	D: how did you get this job -to- you really know this stuff
P: constructive feedback	D: no feedback -to- detailed corrections and suggestions
P: content	D: a complete waste -to- learned something everyday
P: costs	D: king's ransom -to- reasonable expense
P: customer service	D: not in the business of -to- here for the students
P: efficiency	D: get the run around -to- logical and intuitive
P: effort	D: phoning it in -to- constantly updating
P: knowledge	D: read the book -to- wrote the book
P: level of learning	D: beneath most students -to- I learned so much
P: need	D: something to do -to- I need this, to do something
P: preferences	D: just make it through -to- challenge me to learn
P: relevance	D: not what I needed -to- this is on the mark
P: reward	D: why do I care -to- this matters to me
P: rigor	D: this is grad school?-to-had to stretch, but made it
P: standards	D: I expect more - sets the bar high
P: usefulness	D: waste of my time, money, energy -to- I can use this

CATEGORY: Challenges Encountered

(No Subcategories)

PROPERTY:	DIMENSION:
P: competing priorities	D: stressful -to- no big deal
P: competing commitments	D: guilt feelings -to- clear conscience
P: conflicting responsibilities	D: can't do both -to- make adjustments
P: disappointment	D: why bother -to- soon forgotten
P: frustration	D: can't stand it -to- oh well
P: hoop jumping	D: like a trained dog -to- check the box
P: roadblocks	D: significant detour -to- bump in the road
P: sacrifice	D: great sacrifice -to- minor inconvenience
P: scheduling	D: real impediment -to- inconvenience
P: selfishness	D: singular focus -to- self-protective
P: time challenges	D: no moment to spare -to- less free time

Appendix D

Invitation To Share

As you know, I'm an adult student like you (were) and I'm really hoping to help colleges understand why some of us, after going to the effort to return to school, then decide to leave. My goal is to learn from you and others who are helping me with their stories, then provide that information to colleges, so they can better meet our needs. To do that, I'm exploring how our college experiences might be influencing our decisions on whether or not to continue in college until we achieve our personal goals.

By college experiences, I mean anything that you consider part of your time at the college. To give you a few main areas I use the terms, college business processes, support services, feelings of fit, student/advisor interactions, and the classroom.

Take college business processes for instance, I'm looking at things such as the enrollment, registration, and billing processes. For student support services, I'm asking about anything the college offers you such as tutoring, academic advising, and health care. With feelings of fit, I'm asking about your potential sense of belonging, comfort, and acceptance. In the area of student and advisor interactions, I'm referring primarily to relationships between you and your program or dissertation advisors. Finally, in addressing classroom experiences, I'm asking about anything related to your classroom experiences, from its setting such as types of desks and chairs and their arrangement, to areas such as the level of instructor and student interaction, assessment methods, your instructors' competency and caring…you name it. This might even include how you felt about the value of the classes or how you viewed your fellow students.

Appendix E

Email To Participants - Expectations

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope this email finds you happy and healthy.

Since we last visited, I have been analyzing the data from our interviews and am currently striving to ensure I properly represent your perspectives. To that end, I want to tell you where I am in this endeavor, and to ask for your help again.

I began by looking analytically at your experiences within the areas I asked about (business processes, support services, classroom environment, student/advisor interactions, and feelings of fit). This analysis revealed an emphasis in four main categories: relationships with college instructors, advisors and peers; challenges faced in attending college; feelings of fit within the college environment; and the value assessed of your college attendance. This doesn't mean each of you detailed a significant experience related to each of these, but that through your stories there was evidence these categories matter to you. If you disagree with this, please let me know as it is critical to me that I properly represent you.

Here is where it gets especially interesting. The analysis further suggests that running across all four of these categories, is an overarching or central category; expectations. I know some of you said you had no idea what to expect in returning to school, and I'm not suggesting every class or encounter is measured against a predetermined expectation. However, data and logic support that we all have basic expectations, be they positive, neutral or negative, in most any situation. Perhaps we merely expect: an instructor to learn our names (relationships), classes not to take all our free time (challenge), to be nervous at first but eventually to feel okay in class (fit), and to learn something useful (value), but each of those is still an expectation.

This brings me to my twofold request -- first, if you have anything to add from your interview regarding your experiences in the four categories that the data has identified, please share that; and second, please help me learn more about how expectations play in these categories. For instance, the role of expectations in how you see your relationships with instructors, advisors and peers; how they impact your view of challenges you face in attending college as a returning adult student; their influence on your feelings of fit; and of course, what role expectations have in your assessment of the value of your college experience.

Friends, I understand this is neither a simple or easy task, but I ask this favor only because I believe the data is very important. I would appreciate any thoughts you have, as even a short response would help.

Thank you all for the tremendous support you have already provided and thank you in advance for assisting once again. By the way, if any of you want to see a copy of my final dissertation (assuming I eventually get there), just let me know. -- As always, please reply to both of these email addresses: [removed] and [removed] -- Thanks.

My best, Dub

Appendix F

Email To Participants -- Member Checking

Hello again fine folks, in analyzing the data I identified four groupings of events, actions, or interactions (grounded theory calls them Categories) that I mentioned to you in the last email, their slightly modified titles are:

- The Importance of Relationships (referring to student/instructor, student/advisor, student/classmate, and student/college)

- Assessments of Value (referring to return on investment, and application of learning)

- Feelings of Fit (referring to student/instructor, student/advisor, student/classmate, and student/college, interactions and relationships as they influenced feeling of fit)

- Challenges Encountered (referring to the various challenges you may have faced as part of your college experiences).

Would you please look at the attached document (this was the table on page X of this study) so you can see the sorts of characteristics or attributes (grounded theory calls them properties) that went into these four categories, and the range of possibilities for each of them (called dimensions). Now I do not expect any of you to say they all represent you, but hopefully in looking at them you'll be able to say your experiences are included within them. Essentially what these represent are the moments of meaning you identified – what mattered to you in your experiences.

Then here's the key part where I am asking if you agree with me – now I know you're only getting 1/10,000th of the data, but here is first my theory as I see it: "Individual expectations influence returning adult students' persistence."

With the theory I offer the following explanation of the theory, written this time in first person and speaking to you: "Your individual expectations influence your perceptions of your college experiences (events, actions, interactions) in that your experiences are assessed against your expectations, and the resulting perceptions (your seeing the experience as some form of positive, negative, or neutral) then influences your assessment of your overall college experiences (essentially suggesting we all have an internal repository of experiences), with such assessments factoring into your ongoing persistence/departure equation" (should I keep at this or should I leave?).

Does that make sense? You see, I've always wondered why two students sharing essentially the same experience can view it so differently at times, and I now believe it happens all the time, because they are sharing the same event, but not the same experience. Every experience is individual to the student based upon their own expectations of the experience (and by the way, I think this is true of all students, not just us older folks (those in your 40s forgive the term). You see I'm not saying you have a checklist, but rather a basic expectation of many, many things involved in our relationships, assessments of value, feelings of fit, and challenges we encounter, as part of our college experiences.

So, please tell me what you think, and please tell me soon. Thank you, Dub

Appendix G

Informed Consent Letter

Division of Educational Leadership
and Policy Studies
One University Blvd.
St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499
Telephone: 314-516-5941
Fax: 314-516-5942

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities
They Returned, But Will They Stay? Exploring the Influence of College
Experiences on Returning Adult Students' Persistence

Participant _____ HSC Approval Number: <u>101215L</u>

Principal Investigator   <u>W.A. (Dub) Locke III</u>   PI's Phone Number   <u>[removed]</u>

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by W.A. Locke III and sponsored by his advisor, Dr. Paulette Isaac-Savage. The purpose of this research is to explore how college experiences influence returning adult students' decisions regarding continuing to enroll in classes until completing their goals or leaving before completing their goals.

2. Your participation will involve participating in a one-on-one interview which will be conducted on campus. In all, approximately 20 students will be asked about their experiences in college and how those experiences may have influenced their decisions each semester on continuing to enroll in classes. The interview will take approximately one hour, and will be audio recorded for later transcription and analyzing of the data you and others provide. In appreciation of your time, you will be provided with a $5.00 gift card for Subway Sandwiches.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.

4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about adult students' decisions on persistence and may help colleges better meet student needs. In addition, your participation will expand knowledge relative to adult education.

5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. By agreeing to participate, you understand and agree that your data may be shared with other researchers and educators in the form of presentations and/or publications. In all cases, your identity will not be revealed. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection). That agency would be required to maintain the confidentiality of your data. In addition, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked office.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may contact the Principal Investigator, W.A. (Dub) Locke III at [removed] or [removed] or Dr. Paulette Isaac-Savage at [removed] or [removed]@umsl.edu. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research Administration at the University of MO-St. Louis at [removed].

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

Participant's Signature   Date   Participant's Printed Name

_____   _____
Signature of Investigator   Date   Investigator Printed Name

Appendix H

Classroom Desks

College A Classroom Desks ↕

College B Classroom Desks ↕

College A Tables and Chairs