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# An Appreciative Paradigm of Learning Persistence and Success in Online Courses

Carol Anger Richmond

**Carol Anger Richmond**
*Candidate*

_____
*Department*

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality
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*Approved by the Dissertation Committee:*

_____, Chairperson

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Accepted:

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*Dean, Graduate School*

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*Date*

# AN APPRECIATIVE PARADIGM OF LEARNING PERSISTENCE AND

# SUCCESS IN ONLINE COURSES

## BY

## CAROL ANGER RICHMOND

B.A., Sociology, Assumption College, Worcester, MA., 1975
M.S., Educational Leadership, Wheelock College, MA., 1976

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy
Organizational Learning and Instructional Technologies**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**December, 2007**

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## ABSTRACT

There is a need for a better understanding of persistence in online environments from a positive perspective. The appreciative inquiry (AI) model challenges the traditional problem based paradigm with an "affirmative" approach to embrace challenges in a positive light. This study uses an appreciative inquiry approach to grounded theory analysis to study online learning persistence and success.

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study was: 1) to discover the themes and factors that emerge from an appreciative inquiry of online learner persistence; 2) to identify the meaning of persistence for online students; 3) to create provocative propositions of the construct of learning persistence and success in online courses, and 4) to generate a theory of learning persistence and success in online courses.

Through face-to-face and online interviews, thirty students in five online courses at Central New Mexico Community College participated in the study which led to identifying three categories, eight themes and thirty-six learning persistence and success factors.

A new understanding of persistence as a multigenerational and life situational phenomenon arose from the data. Five propositions are presented. They are the following:

1. Online learning persistence commences when the motivations, values and expectations encounter access to online courses.

2. The opportunity for higher engaged learning in online classes is created when students' best practices of organization, interaction and responsibility intersect with faculty's best practices of timely interactions and flexible course structure.

3. Learning persistence and success increases for all students when the online course design includes multigenerational and situational perspectives.

4. Continuous learning persistence and success in online courses is transformational.

5. Appreciative inquiry interviews could positively affect student grades and persistence in the online class.

An Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success Model was created to provide a comprehensive picture of the categories, themes and factors that support learning persistence and success.

The study offers a comprehensive powerful model which designers, instructors and students can use for higher engagement and transformational learning in online courses. It offers an appreciative paradigm of online persistence and online transformational learning processes.

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# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

Background and Context for the Study

Since the late 1800s, when Harvard and Yale Universities began to be concerned about dropouts from their programs, the socialization of students into college life has been an essential ingredient of success in higher academic learning. Over time dropout concerns were revisited and discussed in terms of student retention and then as student persistence. In the past, Ivy League universities wanted to ensure that their elite students were properly inducted into the halls of their institutions. A dropout problem has been identified in all two- and four-year colleges. Today higher educational institutions want students to persist or complete their courses, and to move on to other courses. Persistence and success has become a goal for students and the educational institutions.

Over the past 20 years, there have been many transitions in the study of student retention and learning. One transition was the change from the negative dropout focus to a more positive persistence focus. Another transition in higher education was the addition of online courses to the face-to-face course offerings. The challenges of persistence were magnified in online learning because of the new technology, instructional differences and perceived distance between learners. There is a need for a study to provide a better understanding of learning persistence and success in online courses. In order to discover a better understanding of the topic, this study offers another transition. This study will use an appreciative paradigm to study learning persistence and success as an alternative to the problem based paradigm which has been used to study student dropout and retention.

Two- and four-year higher educational institutions have focused on freshman and first-year students as the critical group most likely to be at risk of dropping out or stopping. Many interventions and supports have been tried, and theories and research conducted, in the search for the answer to the question: What helps students persist in higher education?

The cost of lost students affects revenue from the state and from tuition, and the cost of recruiting and admitting new students is high. Lower student enrollment ultimately means less revenue for the institution, which affects the salary and job security of thousands of college faculty and employees. Students are not receiving the education they desire and are left less prepared for the workplace. Innovative teaching techniques in particular are being reviewed critically. Even if educational change innovations enhance learning and are more accessible to the students, the litmus test is whether students are persisting and are successful in face-to-face classes.

Online education, one form of distance education, is an alternative method to face-to-face classes for completing a course and earning a degree. It is also a way to gain additional knowledge for many adults who return to college to improve their career options (Kerka, 1995). The online learning delivery method is an inviting way to acquire knowledge and skills for adult learners who need flexibility in their class hours and location in order to balance school, home, and work. Online courses can provide students with individualized, self-paced opportunities for feedback and learning. Contrary to popular belief, they can also offer interaction with peer learners in a community environment that is collaborative and social (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Students from a wide variety of backgrounds and educational experiences have found distance learning an inviting

alternative. Online learning, a type of distance learning where students are able to converse online on the World Wide Web with each other either synchronously or asynchronously in a text based format. Their online dialog is recorded and saved for later review. Online courses have become a popular method of distance learning and instruction.

However, distance learning is not for everyone. Some people prefer to have the face-to-face contact with other students and faculty while others like the opportunity to reflect on their studies in private. From an institutional perspective, online courses are under scrutiny as questionably safe investments for higher educational institutions. Will there be a return on investment? Will students succeed and persist?

I am one of five Achievement Coaches at Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This job position was created solely to address the problem of retaining adult learners. As an Achievement Coach in the Business and Information Technology Division (BIT), I am responsible for the persistence and success of 7,000 business students (out of a student body of 23, 000). In BIT, students have a choice of taking online or face-to-face classes. Surprisingly, despite the extra fee and higher learning curve for distance learning classes, students are flocking in numbers around 4,000 to online classes, especially in the summer. The BIT Division at Central New Mexico Community College has an 85 percent persistence rate for on-site classes and an even higher 87 percent persistence rate for online courses. However, the grade point average of two cohorts of new, full time students with declared majors that have been taking online courses for two years appears to be dropping each term. The online students are persisting in online courses at a higher rate than students in on-site

classes but their grade point average is lower. The national reports show low online learning retention rates while CNM reports very high retention rates.

Increasingly, community colleges are entering the race to provide distance-learning courses, especially online courses. According to the National Education Association (NEA) (2000), at least 58 percent of higher educational institutions offer distance-learning courses via the Internet. In addition, the number of course offerings and enrollments in those programs have more than doubled in the past three years. More than half of these students are adults over the age of 24 (NEA, 2000). Efforts to offer courses to a larger number of students are seen as a way for educational institutions to be competitive for students, which offers more assurance that the institutions will be viable in the long term, even if governmental funding is cut (Scott, 1999). However, in the race to increase the use of technology for course delivery, efforts to identify the needs of students have not always been in the forefront of educators' planning.

The departure question has been the object of inquiry for more than 70 years (Braxton, 2002). There are several models on retention and quantitative research studies on face-to-face courses. Three different researchers have identified numerous factors that increase persistence and retention (Tinto, 1975; Attinasi, 1984; Braxton, 2002). The factors (Tinto, 1975; Attinasi; 1994) have identified include—but are not limited to—integration, G.P.A., time management, financial assistance, social reality construction, and internal locus of control. These studies have been based on a problem-solving model or theory.

While progress has been made in the area of first-year student retention in face-to-face courses, persistence in online courses has just begun to be studied. Few system wide

interventions have been reported in online education.  National reports on distance

learning courses continue to focus on the low retention and success rates in distance

learning courses and question how to increase students' learning persistence.  Educational

administrators, faculty, support staff, and students are left wondering:  What encourages

and energizes online students to be successful and persistent in distance learning courses?

*Pilot Study*

In Summer 2004, I conducted a pilot research study of online students to consider

the factors affecting persistence in online classes, using social constructivism as the

framework.  The pilot online research study focused on two online business classes,

Introduction to Business 113 and Accounting 101A, taught by well-trained online faculty.

The results showed an important finding that the students attributed persistence to

teacher-student interaction.  An expectation that they held of their online class was that

they would socially share online with the teacher.  Interestingly, even though there was

considerable learner-to-learner interaction, the students did not attribute their success to

online learner-to-learner interaction, as Moore (1989) and other social constructivist

researchers would have expected.  The students attributed their persistence primarily to

their commitment to their own goals and motivation, which showed an internal locus of

control.  Of most interest was the fact that the students who persisted had constructed an

achievement mentality, despite the fact that the College Success Inventory that they took

as part of the pilot study indicated that they had a high dropout prone level, meaning that

they were at risk of dropping out. The most important findings of my pilot study were

that students attributed their persistence and success to their goals and the faculty support.

The students did not attribute their interaction with other students as contributing to success and persistence.

<div align="center">Statement of the Problem/Opportunity</div>

Previous research on dropouts, retention and even persistence has primarily been from a deficit-based approach to problem solving which begins with seeking out the problem, the weak link in the system. This approach limits the scope of alternatives and often identifies more problems. Alternative models and theories, which are open to possibilities and based on best practices, are recommended for examining retention, and persistence. The appreciative inquiry (AI) model challenges the traditional problem based paradigm with an "affirmative" approach to embrace challenges in a positive light. In the AI model, the words chosen and the questions asked drive the stories and responses.

The factors and positive language that foster an affirmative achievement mentality for learning persistence and success in online courses have not been studied sufficiently because dropout has primarily been studied from a deficit-based framework and not from an appreciative framework. In addition, there is insufficient qualitative research about persistence in online classes. Qualitative research is important because it offers insight into the multiple perspectives of complex topics from the perspective of the research participant. Data from a qualitative study provides themes and theoretical frameworks to help online faculty and students increase persistence. According to Van de Akker et al. (1999), there was an urgent need for development research to provide theoretical frameworks to help online course designers promote persistence and success in distance learning. The question of what positively influences distance learning students--

especially those in online learning courses and hybrid courses, has not been sufficiently explored to provide guidance to faculty, instructional designers, and students deciding whether to enroll in distance learning courses.

Understanding the characteristics and meaning of learner persistence is a challenge in on-site classes. It is even more challenging to identify the variables that positively affect persistence in this new online environment. Through grounded theory variables can be identified from interviewing students who participate in online learning programs.

The overall purpose of the present study is to gain a detailed understanding of the experiences and perceptions community college students have of online learning persistence and success. Multiple definitions and related terms for persistence exist. Persistence can't be separated from success and success from learning. In order to be successful a student must persist. The assumption of higher educators is that if a student passed the class they are successful and therefore they have learned the required material. Learning has been shown to positively impact retention and persistence (Tinto, 1976). Therefore, this study uses a combined terminology of learning persistence and success and investigates the construct of learning persistence and success in order to address the problem of multiple definitions of related terms in the research and to help researchers and students have common terminology. This construct will be used as a central organizing theme for the research study. For the purpose of this study, the construct of learning persistence and success has been chosen to simplify and focus the language on retention, persistence, and student success. The construct of learning persistence and success was developed based on the learning theories of Vygotsky, the persistence

theories rooted in positive psychology and optimism by Seligman, common usage in higher education, and success as discussed by the Sloan Institute, a national research organization that studies online education, and other national educational assessment organizations. A more in-depth explanation can be found in the literature review chapter of this study.

## Purpose of the Study

My overall purpose was to gain a detailed understanding of the experiences and perceptions community college students have of online learning persistence and success. More specifically, the purpose of this grounded theory study was four fold, to discover the themes and factors that emerge from an appreciative inquiry of online learner persistence and to identify the meaning of persistence for online students in order to create provocative propositions of the construct of learning persistence and success in online courses and to generate a theory of learning persistence and success in online courses based on appreciative inquiry. The study is based on the constructivist beliefs that to understand the world of meaning, one must interpret it. The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning making and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the words and actions of students (Schwandt, 1994).

In order to discover what affects the online learner, this study sought to find answers to the following questions:

- What general themes emerge from an appreciative inquiry of online learning persistence and success with community college online students?
- What understanding or meaning emerges about learning persistence and success in online courses?

- What provocative proposal of learning persistence and success in online courses emerges from the data?

- What theory explains online learning persistence and success?

There is a natural and theoretically sound relationship between qualitative research, appreciative inquiry and grounded theory. Through qualitative research, the emic voices of the participants can be identified and presented more authentically and naturally than in a more positivistic qualitative research method. Lincoln & Guba (1987) support the notion of naturalistic inquiry through qualitative research as a viable, valid method.  Qualitative research literature appears to strongly support the methodology inherent in AI, which is based on interviews, stories, positive directions, and image development.  Cooperrider and Srivastas (1987) discuss AI as a form of action research that attempts to create new theories, ideas, and image through interview and focus group data.  Huberman & Miles (2003) believe that qualitative studies have a peculiar life cycle that spreads the collection and analysis through out the study. They call for different modes of inquiry at different moments. The appreciative inquiry approach allows for that flexibility of modes.

This study uses the following modes: face-to-face, telephone interviews, and online threaded discussion interviews. The idea is to focus much of the data collection on emergent themes of constructs and still collect additional data. In qualitative research, this ongoing analysis corresponds to the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).  Grounded theory ensures that the analysis will be undifferentiated and disjointed until the researcher has some sense of how a construct is understood by the participants. Grounded theory is an inductive approach to analysis to generate themes and meaning

from the inquiry data. Appreciative inquiry becomes a qualitative method of data collection that supports the inductive iterative nature and goals of grounded theory to generate theory and meanings.  The use of AI approach to data collection changes the research from a problem-based approach to a positive possibility approach, which is a shift in paradigm.

There are several models on retention and research on persistence in face-to-face (f2f) courses, as described by Tinto (2002) and Braxton (2002) in the literature review from a sociological and social psychological perspective.  Attinasi's (1994) description of socially constructed reality theory offers a framework to understand persistence as socially driven; however, sheds some light on the direction of socially constructed reality theory.  If reality is socially constructed according to Braxton (2002), Attinasi (1994) and Tierney (1992), and if one's belief or meaning affects persistence (Bandura, 1994; Stage & Hossler, 2002), then it is possible that learner persistence in computer-mediated conferences can be understood by uncovering the conversation and social interaction of distance learners and faculty.

## Significance of the Study

Low persistence and success rates result in poor retention rates. Educational administrators, instructional designers, and systems planners would benefit from more in-depth research on how to apply theories of social constructivism, socially constructed meaning, integration, collaboration, optimism, and positive emotions to student persistence and success in CMC courses.

Successfully reducing dropout rates and stabilizing enrollments allows for better allocation of resources, as it improves the return on investment (Martinez, 2003).  Low

student retention rates can reflect poorly on a program or university. Increased

persistence positively affects refunding allocations, cost of equipment, design and

delivery, and the overall graduation rates of the institution.  A learning persistence model

would help lower dropout rates and their resulting financial losses.  When students do not

persist in an online class, they also suffer a loss.  The cost per credit results in a financial

loss.  Students on grants and scholarships have used valuable time and money, which

cannot be replaced.  In the long run, these adults will not be able to meet their goals of

gaining a higher salary or finding a new career while balancing school, home, and work.

Something will suffer, or the goal will be dropped.

Faculty will understand the relationship and connection of course design and

delivery to the factors that promote student success enhance learner persistence.  Support

staff would have a conceptual framework from which to draw when developing support

resources.  Distance learning support staff would have a better understanding of the

factors that increase persistence in online courses.

Finally, learner retention and persistence theory will be enhanced through a study

that identifies best practices and builds on those elements to develop a working,

energizing provocative proposition or theory.  It is my hope that the findings from this

qualitative research on the variables positively influencing learner persistence in online

courses will not only resonate with students, faculty, researchers, and distance learning

systems designers but will also have a life- giving, heliotropic effect

Appreciative Inquiry has its own special use of language. Definitions of AI terms

frequently used in AI can be found in the appendix.  Through the use of appreciative

inquiry (AI) as an approach to the data collection method, the theory of persistence in

online classes could take a leap into the next generation of thinking by offering a new paradigm for studying dropout from a positive framework and not a negative one. Appreciative inquiry is based on five principles, social constructionist theory, constructivist theory, positive psychology and social constructivist frameworks. See appendix description of the AI principles including constructionism.

<div align="center">Methods and Research Questions</div>

This qualitative study used an appreciative inquiry approach to grounded theory, to explore the following questions:

1. What general themes emerge from an appreciative inquiry of online learning persistence and success with community college online students?

2. What understanding or meaning emerges about learning persistence and success in online courses?

3. What provocative proposition of learning persistence and success in online courses emerges from the data?

4. What theory explains online learning persistence and success?

The research used an appreciative inquiry qualitative methodology to collect the data using a convenience sample.  A convenience sample was used because any students in a distance learning class at CNM would be faced with learning persistence and success issues. However, having students from five different classes offers more breadth to the findings. The data analysis used grounded theory to develop themes and a theoretical framework.  The population was taken from the Fall 2006 online students taking Business & Information Technology Division's distance learning classes at Central New Mexico Community College and from the Fall 2004 first-time student cohort that have taken

online courses. Thirty students participated in either an online threaded appreciative inquiry discussion, or a one-on-one interview, on the experience of persistence and success in the online classes. Five online faculty of the online students participated in an appreciative inquiry interview about persistence and success in online courses. Data on student grades, and persistence was collected from Banner, the college's registration database. More information on the grades and persistence data can be found in Chapter Three. Finally, an advisory committee comprising faculty, online director, achievement coach, and student helped craft the questions and review the findings for a member check on the results.

This study used the first three phases of the 4-D model of Appreciative Inquiry, which includes the four phases of Discovery, Dream Design and Destiny. This model is designed to meet the unique challenges of organizations and educational systems. It has been successfully applied to education and social change efforts. The Discovery phase is where participants inquire into the life-giving forces of the courses to begin to understand and build a positive core. Participants and researchers uncover and value the best of "what is?" This information was generated through the engaging interviews or focus groups in this study. The second phase is the Dream phase where participants dialogue and create the dream for the organization. A collective vision is defined as to "What might be?" This information was collected during the interviews. Finally, phase three Design is where a provocative proposition is created to determine the ideal, "how can it be?" The construct of learning persistence and success in online courses was co-created from the data analysis, researcher perceptions and advisory committee review.

Grounded theory was used for qualitative content analysis using both Glaser's, (2005) theoretical coding methods and (Berg's, 2004, p. 286) Stage Model of Qualitative Content Analysis. An advisory committee comprised of an online faculty member, online student, Director of Distance Learning and an Achievement Coach was used to review and refine the draft interview questions and to provide feedback on the research findings for triangulation.

The research analysis and resulting themes and tenets provided clues about the variables positively affecting persistence and achievement in online courses. The literature of persistence in school and the capabilities of distance education helped to identify where related theoretical constructs overlap, where they diverge, and which ones primarily drive persistence. This research sought to increase our understanding of the meaning of learner persistence in distance education from a social constructionist, sociological, and psychological perspective. It attempted to craft through language a provocative proposition of what concepts are helpful for online learner persistence and success. Finally, it raised questions and identified themes for further research on learner persistence in distance learning.

<center>Limitations of the Study</center>

My purpose was to conduct an inquiry of the best practices to provide the data to create positive powerful informational images and ultimately offer a new understanding of learner persistence and success in online courses. The limitations include the type of students studied and the collection model. The study focused only on students from community college online classes who volunteered to participate. This study used an appreciative inquiry (AI) theory for data collection through the 4D questions model and

process. This study did not focus on the reasons why students fail or drop out. It did uncover from the stories of the students, and from the faculty the factors that contributed to the students' persistence. Data were collected two times during the course, in the beginning and after the drop date, only those students who completed the first interview were included. The limitations described above were few and necessary to answer the research questions.

AI questions focused on the students' peak experience and greatest personal triumph in persisting despite adversity. AI is primarily an organization development tool. It has been used in research for at least nine dissertations, but in this research study it was used as a collection methodology only. Therefore, this research study explored how best to use the AI approach as a data collection tool for research in light of grounded theory analysis practices. AI is not a problem-solving model. It was critical to the purpose of the study and specific population being studied.

As the researcher, I was the sole investigator conducting the interviews. Faculty were asked to participate, to invite their students' participation and to use their web class discussion board feature to collect the interview responses. I was the only person conducting the analysis and generating findings. My bias as an action researcher is presented in Chapter Four. The findings were member checked regularly by faculty, students, and staff especially in the beginning and at the end of the study. The advisory committee reviewed the draft findings, and a final data review was made based on their recommendations.

The following list describes the key terms used in this study.

Key Terms

*Appreciative Inquiry (AI):* An organization development and student support process based on storytelling that seeks to discover the best in a situation, to identify themes, to create dreams of possibilities for the future, and to design delivery strategies for achieving the dream (Cooperrider, 1986).

*Distance Learning:* Activities carried out by learners who are involved in distance education, which includes "all arrangements for providing instruction through print or electronic communication media to persons engaged in planned learning in a place or time different from that of the instructor or instructors" (Moore, 1990, p. xv).

*Learning:* A socially situated cognitive function developed through the process of intra-psychological interaction within oneself and inter-psychological interaction with others to create meanings and new knowledge (Vygotski, 1978).

*Online Courses: C*ourses that use the Internet to transmit course material and facilitate communication between the teacher and students, often called computer mediated delivery courses. All learning activities are completed at a distance. There is little, if any, face-to-face contact between teacher and student during the course delivery.

*Online Faculty:* Those who provide online students with the instructional services of a course.

*Online Institution:* An educational institution that provides only courses or programs taught online.

*Online Learning:* Interaction of online students in synchronous and asynchronous communications to build higher levels of cognition, share ideas, make connections with each other, and analyze problems in a computer mediated course. The

social presence necessary for online learning is the online connection of students to students and teacher to students through instructional techniques (Gunawardena, 1994).

*Online Students:* Those engaged in a purposive learning activity associated with online courses.

*Online Support Staff:* Those who provide online students with mentoring, tutoring, learning resources, advising, and technical assistance.

*Persistence*: Characteristic of a student to complete the course and continue to the next course. It is also the act of continuing on toward the student's goals. Many institutions use this information to determine who completes a degree or certificate on time or within a stated period of time. Accrediting bodies use the completion rates as a measure of educational quality (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2000.

*Retention*: "The number of learners or students who progress from one part of the educational program to the next" (Martinez, 2003, p.3). Institutionally, it is the student enrollment status of non-withdrawal, which does not include GPA. Kerka (1995) says that retention is "to keep learners in programs until they achieve their goals."

*Success:* Student achievement in a course, usually represented by a grade, indicating that the student has met the course expectations.

## Summary

Chapter One provides background information on persistence data and issues in higher education and a description of the online learning context for the study. It outlines the study's purpose of gaining a detailed understanding of learning persistence and success in order to identify themes, create a theory or model of appreciative inquiry and provocative proposals. The appreciative inquiry data collection and grounded theory

analysis methods were presented along with the research questions. Finally, the initial limitations of the study, significance and key terms were discussed.  Chapter Two will review the literature supporting this research.

**CHAPTER II**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter will review the supporting research literature in topics relevant to the proposed study on learning persistence and success in online courses at a community college. The chapter reviews four streams of literature: (1) retention, persistence and student success concerning the history of persistence research in higher education; (2) distance learning in online courses, discussing the distance learning theories that have been applied to online learning research; (3) learning persistence and success in online courses construct based on theoretical frameworks of constructivism, and social constructivism, justifying the proposed construct; and (4) appreciative inquiry as a research approach introducing it is a departure from its traditional use in organizational development, and proposing appreciative inquiry as a new paradigm to study persistence based on appreciative inquiry theory, principles, purposes, constructionism and use as an approach to grounded theory methodology will be reviewed in this chapter.

Retention and Persistence

Persistence and retention are measurements used to indicate success, along with degree completion, transfer, and graduation in the world of face-to-face educational programs. The Sloan-C Report (2005) discusses the fact that there are still too few distance education courses among key undergraduate and graduate courses for faculty to value distance learning. The Sloan Report also shows that the faculty level of interest in distant learning courses is low. Therefore, persistence measures similar to those for face-to-face courses appear to be the respected data source.

*Persistence in Face-to-Face Courses*

Since 1975, academic and social integration has been the prevailing theoretical solution for retention.  The theoretical scheme of academic and social integration derives from the suicide theory of Durkeim (1951).  According to Durkheim, the likelihood of committing suicide increases when a person lacks two types of integration with society: moral integration and collective affiliation.  Suicide serves as an analogy for students who leave educational institutions without achieving their goals (Tinto, 1975).

In research of postsecondary education, the degree to which individual students are academically integrated with an educational system has been demonstrated by grade performance (G.P.A.) or intellectual development (Tinto 1975, p. 104).  Social integration has been measured by the degree to which students are involved in peer group activities, semiformal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative staff within universities (Tinto, 1975, p. 107).  Dropout studies use the term academic and social integration when referring to the relations between students and teachers, peer students, and institutions (Shin, 2001).  There are several shortcomings with perspective. Braxton, (2002) has shown that integration for students from other cultures and races may not flourish by being assimilated into the majority activities. Tinto was strongly influenced by an assimilation assumption. In addition, this research is based on a problem-solving model with dropout as the problem and academics or social integration as the solution.

According to Kember (1989), establishing academic and social integration requires personal contact between students and faculty and staff in an educational institution, whether the students are in on-site courses or online courses.  Administrative

support staff play an important role in increasing or decreasing students' collective

affiliation with the institution. Kember, 1989, p. 205).  An assumption by educators

regarding academic and social integration theory is that students who have highly

integrated connections with teachers, students, and the institution are less likely to

withdraw from their studies than those with low integration.

Tinto's assumptions are important to note because they have influenced retention

research.

- The goal is not retention; it is learning.

- The institution's goal is not education but creating the setting for education to
  occur.

- A key factor is involvement in the social and intellectual development of the
  student.

- Commitment is key; there must be a reciprocal obligation between the
  institution and the individual.

- Commitment to institutions leads to student commitment to the institution and
  the student's own learning.

- The goal is to improve the quality of institutional life.

- Success and retention depend on the nature of the educational community.

The stages of separation and transition that Tinto outlined were as follows:

application, admission, registration, first semester, graduation, or withdrawal.

Tinto believes that: the social structure of college classrooms plays a role in the

student retention process, serving as small academic and social communities that link

students to the larger institution; that faculty pedagogical behavior shapes these social

structures; that the critical factor determining the quality of a student's academic and social integration is how the student negotiated the transition from secondary education to higher education. Richardson (2000) agreed with Tinto that social systems outside the educational institution could also have a substantial impact on students' decision to persist.

Tinto was one of the first to study retention empirically.  His convincing argument to four-year schools has been well received by concerned administrators worried about why they were losing so many students.  Richardson (2000) supported the findings by Tinto (1986) that campus-based education had a course completion rate of about 55% and that the remaining students took longer than 4 years to finish.  It is important to remember that his very popular theory was based on suicide theory, certainly a deficit-based topic.

In contrast to Tinto's theory, my 2004 pilot research study on community college online persistence factors findings showed that personal support from teachers and students' intentions and goals had more of an effect on retention than online interaction among learners.  The research by (Richardson, 2000; and Braxton et al., 1997) also found Tinto's theory to be too limiting for two-year college adult online students.  More importantly, Tinto does not believe that retention in online courses is very likely because of the lack of opportunity for integration and socialization.

For Tinto, a sociologist, his development of integration theory is consistent with what sociologists would call socialization.  John Braxton, a social psychologist, found Tinto's development of integration theory to be limited in scope.  Braxton (2002) developed a collection of authors who critique Tinto's integration theories and empirical

methodologies from a variety of perspectives.  Braxton introduced new perspectives and frameworks for retention and persistence.  His work features authors from a variety of academic fields, including economics, sociology, psychology, and education.

The review by Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) of Tinto's theory of the influence of academic integration on goal commitment and institutional commitment or departure decisions failed to show strong empirical support.  They make a convincing argument that retention involves more than just being integrated into the college environment.  Especially important is that fact that Tinto's research was limited to traditional college students in four-year schools.  Adult learners in community colleges have less need to be integrated because they typically have families, jobs, and communities to which they belong.  Adult learner issues are related to balancing their responsibilities and finding supports that ensure academic success.

The following models also explore retention and persistence:

- The Eaton & Bean (1995) retention model from an individual student's viewpoint is based on four psychological theories: attitude behavior, coping behavior, self-efficacy, and attribution.  These theories account for social integration, institutional commitment, and departure decisions (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997).

- Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora (2002) propose a higher-level theory, suggesting a new "helper" theory to account for the collegiate experience of minority students (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997).

- The adaptation by (Bentler & Speckart, 1979) of the Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) model combines four psychological theories of retention.  The model

proposes that as students enter college with a complex array of personal characteristics and interact with the institutional environment, several psychological processes occur that result in self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased efficacy, and internal locus of control to increase motivation.

- Attinasi's (1994) theory of socially constructed reality sheds some light on the direction socially constructed reality is taking. If reality is socially constructed according to Braxton (2002), Attinasi (1994), and Tierney (1992), and if one's belief or meaning affects persistence (Bandura, 1994 Stage & Hossler, 2002), then learner persistence in computer-mediated conferences might be understood by uncovering the conversation and social interaction of distance learners and faculty.

With the increasing number of alternative theories on persistence that have developed out of integration theory, it is fair to say that persistence is not due just to the integration of a student into the social and academic culture of the educational institution, as proposed by Tinto (1997). Tinto's interaction theory has been further developed using an inductive theory based on economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological theoretical perspectives to explain social integration, institutional commitment, and departure decisions. This study expanded on the preceding theories by focusing on the positive factors and building on them to generate a theoretical model of learning persistence and success.

*Retention and Persistence Summary*

This section of Chapter 2 presented the history of persistence research in higher education. Persistence measures used to indicate success in higher education were discussed to show the importance of persistence in education. Retention, persistence theories and student success interventions in face-to-face courses were discussed including literature showing the conflicts in retention and persistence theories from a variety of academic disciplines. The well-known Vincent Tinto integration theory and assumptions were presented. Theoretical challenges to Tinto's theory by several authors showed the evolution of retention and persistence theories that lay the foundation for looking at persistence in online courses in this study.

## Distance Learning in Online Courses

Research literature on distance learning defines distance learning as activities carried out by learners who are involved in distance education, which includes "all arrangements for providing instruction through print or electronic communication media to persons engaged in planned learning in a place or time different from that of the instructor or instructors" (Moore, 1989, xv) the acquisition of knowledge can ideally occur at any time or at any place. Online learning, a type of distance learning, can be defined as the interaction of online students in synchronous and asynchronous communications to build higher levels of cognition, share ideas, make connections with each other, and analyze problems in a computer mediated course. Social presence is necessary for online learning and the online connection of students to students and teacher to students through instructional techniques (Gunawardena, 1994).

Historically, learning environments have been teacher-centered and closed systems, with very narrowly defined boundaries. However, online learning--a more open, learner-centered system, using the World Wide Web and other electronic resources--is becoming more and more common and is often the environment of choice for many learners. Online learning is a good avenue for learning because it can be considered an effective vehicle for the constructivist approach to learning (Wilson & Lowry, 2000).

*Distance Learner Characteristics*

Many distance education (DE) students are in their late twenties and have jobs and families (Simonson et al., 2000). They must be able to manage and balance the different aspects of their lives in order to have time for studying (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Role conflict, time management, family problems, and economic concerns can all present barriers to online learners. A student could easily feel overwhelmed trying to juggle job demands, caring for children or elderly parents, and completing homework. Adult learners could underestimate the commitment required to complete a degree or not properly anticipate the level of student responsibilities needed to be successful.

Community college learners often return to school for career-related reasons (Fjortoft, 1995). Their goal is to increase their earnings and gain greater career satisfaction or a promotion. Some students take courses to broaden their education or update skills. Many have been away from formal education for a long time. They are often unsure of their academic abilities and study skills (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Their lack of confidence may result from bad experiences. Adult learners may also bring a communication style not well suited for online learning. Communication anxiety is an

issue that has been found in the completion of telecourses (Pugliese, 1995). Most online courses now require students to post discussion board questions and to enter into a discussion on a variety of topics. This is difficult for many students who are anxious about their writing skills.

Furthermore, many students consider themselves novices at use of the computer and have limited technical abilities. Knowing how to use the technology is an advantage. Just logging in can be a challenge. Many students will consider themselves incapable of handling the computer requirements of online learning (Lynch, 2001).

Isolation is an issue for online learners, who may feel cut off from the social activity of learning (White & Weight, 2000). People who feel lonely tend to be less engaged in the learning process (Pugliese, 1995). Persistent learners will discover ways to overcome or manage these barriers.

A study by Garland (1994) demonstrates adult distance students' double –barriers, which are derived from the role conflicts between being "adults" and being "students." According to Garland's ethnography, adult students desire respect, personal control, and fulfillment on the one hand, while on the other hand they seek support and help from others. If the two roles conflict, students may experience difficulties in maintaining the desired status of being adults while playing the role of students. This situation could lead to withdrawal (Garland, 1994, p. 45).

Garland's study explains why adult students are so reluctant to reveal their need for help from teachers and others. A more in-depth explanation of this issue is critical to online learner research because online learners' needs are even more difficult to notice unless online learners choose to share them.

Note that results in this research suggest that the psychological aspects of the conflict in student and adult roles may be more pressing for distance students than for typical adult students. Indeed, their problems seem to have been exacerbated by the distance mode, that is, by the act that they were not necessarily perceived by the institution, course, authors, and tutors as mature adults. (Garland, 1994, p.50)

This study's inquiry approach to information gathering provided the opportunity for students to identify their anxiety or uncomfortable feelings about this adult-student role difference. In fact, in the pilot study, one student said that she was not made to feel inferior in the course.

Granger and Benke (1998) think that we must begin by looking at who these distance learning students are. What do they bring to the distance education course? What influences them to persist and succeed? Dille and Mezack (1991) found that the high-risk students were younger than 25, were divorced, had taken fewer than 30 college-credit hours, had a GPA lower than 2.9, and had other similar test scores.

*Cultural influences*. Distance learning students often come from diverse backgrounds. Because classrooms are becoming increasingly multicultural, there is a critical need to pay attention to the diverse learning styles associated with various ethnic groups (Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998). These two authors believe that it is possible to provide guidelines for designing distance instruction and support for these minorities. Through adequate feedback, collaborative activities, and reflective opportunities, Hispanic students and other minorities can be successful in distance education courses. Gunawardena (1994) expanded the theory of social presence and its implications for interaction, communication, and the social context of telecommunication-based distance

education.  Gunawardena has continued to study the online context and satisfaction with online learning

Gibson (2003) describes the multifaceted environment and learning context in which students find themselves.  She concludes with a challenge to student services staff to assist students with the process of integrating study into work, family, and social demands.  She recognizes that this is out of the college's control.  The most that can be expected is that the staff understands the multiple forces and creates sources for emotional support to the learners as they begin to act on their multiple contexts to reach their learning goals.

Gibson (1998) thinks that social context can profoundly affect the success of the distance teaching-learning transaction, which in turn affects retention and persistence.  She believes that distance education must take into account the learner, teacher, content, and communication medium.

Anxiety in distance education may derive from the cultural distance between individual student and the higher education institution, rather than from an individual student's psychopathology.  Grace (1994) suggests that the issue of distance students' access to the cultural norms of the institution needs to be more rigorously investigated,

given that a successful introduction to institutional culture increases the likelihood of successful student learning in formal settings. Herrmann (1988, p. 9) conceptualizes the process of introduction to the institutional culture as "re-socialization," through which students make a transition from their identities as non-students to distance students.

*Persistence in Online Courses*

Online learning research studies have identified several factors that affect retention and persistence in online classes. They range from objective factors like integration, G.P.A., financial assistance, and student support to subjective factors like individual attributes, motivation, and locus of control.

Although each of the preceding factors has been shown to have a relationship to student persistence and success, student support has been found to have a significant impact on online students. A review of the literature on distance learning online student support identifies a few key themes or perspectives: Interaction, social construction, online togetherness, cultural influences and challenges, distance learning's multifaceted environment, self-concept, social presence, control or independence, and faculty responsibility.

Social relationships with people outside of educational institutions, family and spouses have an influence on online learner success. Eastmond (1995) found that students gained varying degrees of family support, depending on the value family members placed on education. Through in-depth interviews with students in computer-mediated courses, Eastmond found an interesting gender-related family dynamic: Wives play an active role assisting their husbands in taking online courses, regarding the degree

their husbands would get as a family promotion. On the other hand, husbands tend to take a passive attitude toward their wives' pursuing distance education courses.

Gibson (1998); Sanchez and Gunawardena (1998); Moore (1996) and others focus on how social context and cultural influences affect persistence. Yet Dille and Mezack (1991); Garrison and Baynton (1987); Simpson (2000); and Gibson (1998) view persistence from the perspective of the individual, and the individual's self-concept, level of control, possible disability, or personal characteristics.

It appears from the preceding multifaceted persistence factors that persistence theory as a phenomenon can best be studied through inquiry, dialog, and discourse. Consequently, appreciative inquiry--a dialog and discourse-based process--will be presented later in this chapter as a data collection method.

*Distance Learning in Online Courses Summary*

Section two of this literature review focused on online learning literature and its historical roots in distance learning. Distance learner characteristics and cultural influences were presented from Moore & Kearsely's and Gunawardena perspectives to show the type of population that participated in the study. Finally, research discussing the persistence of online learning students, distance learning persistence, and learning theory as it applies to online courses was presented. The two previous sections on retention and persistence and distance learning in online courses laid the foundation for the purpose of this study. In studying persistence and success in online courses, the literature hint that the crux of the matter lies in coming up with a theory that simplifies persistence, creates a new construct, and provides provocative propositions based on a

new paradigm. Consequently this study proposed a learning persistence and success construct for online learning.

<div align="center">Learning Persistence and Success in Online Courses Construct</div>

Using social constructivist and positive psychological theoretical frameworks and appreciative inquiry theory, this study expanded on the theories of retention, persistence, and academic success in current literature to develop a proposed new construct of learning persistence and success. The goal was to develop standard language or image that identifies and motivates users to focus on the desired state of learning persistence and success, as opposed to the undesirable dropout and failure in higher education. Examples of retention and academic success research studies from a problem viewpoint are noted in the following paragraph.

*Dropout to Persistence Theoretical Frameworks*

*Dropout.* The primary focus of Gipson (1998) is to identify influences on learners' decisions to leave distance-learning courses before completion, or attrition. The variety of models to explain or predict attrition include characteristics in the student's educational preparation, motivation, situational attributes in the learner's life situation (such as family, work hours, employer support for studies, changes in life situations, health, and mental health), and the factors related to the educational institution (such as quality instruction, tutorials, and support). Personal perception of the student's likelihood of success, the value of the education, study habits, persistence behaviors, and the need for support are identified indicators of persistence.

The multifaceted concept of academic self-concept changes with time and classroom experiences, while concurrently the unique task of learning at a distance is an

additional issue. Gipson (1998) describes academic enhancers and detractors to academic self-concept.She conclude with the premise that achievements become aptitudes. Further learning, knowledge, skill, strategy, regulation, and motivation intermingle; all have both cognitive and conative aspects (Gibson, 1998, p.9).

*Self-concept.* Self-concept and the personal characteristics of online learners emerged from this study's inquiry question: What do you value about yourself as a learner? The resulting data helped build on current retention and persistence literature by directing the inquiry toward the positive characteristics of successful online students.

Career counseling, self-assessment, mentors, advisors, additional print resources, videos, and electronic resources should be provided to the distance learner. Distance learning courses should be adapted to the learner's needs, and student services must reflect these learners' unique goals. Peer support networks and mentoring help promote student success. Faculty must be aware of students' needs and willing to make referrals to additional resources. Faculty can become the whole institution for these students, and the institution must support them.

*Level of Control: Locus of Control Theory*. Persistence in distance education has been considered from the perspective of the individual learner using the concepts of control and learner satisfaction. Theoreticians have focused on locus of control, learning styles, and demographic data to predict success. Garrison and Baynton (1987) used the concept of control to explain persistence in distance education courses. They presented the concept of control in distance education by discussing independence as a characteristic helpful in distance learning persistence, and control as a way to talk about independence, power, and support. Anderson and Garrison (1998) expanded on control

theory by discussing how learning in a networked world presents many new activities, opportunities, and responsibilities for both the faculty and the learner.

This study supports the point that Garrison and Baynton make which is that it is pointless to give control to the learner if the learner does not have the proficiency nor the adequate support to make use of it. Control in distance education will have to focus on issues of support, proficiency, and independence.  Control theory provides a good explanation for the internal processes of the online learner; but it does not account for one of the most important aspects of an online learning environment, its interactive nature.

Richardson (2000) discussed data on retention and progress inventories like Distance Education Student Progress, devised by Kember, Murphy, Siaw, and Yuen (1991).  His research on student retention in distance education looked at German distance education students in order to test whether they were capable of studying at a university.  It is not clear whether non-completion means the same thing in the context of distance education (Coldway, 1986).  Coldway found that course characteristics like turnaround time on papers and student interaction positively affected retention in distance courses.  In addition, he found that student's intentions, goals, and approaches to learning and personal support from teachers, counselors, and family members had more of an effect than academic factors on course completion. Although the study's findings are useful, they are developed from a problem-solving framework, not from a positive perspective, which is possible with appreciative inquiry (AI).  Richardson's, Kember's, and Coldway's literature provides guidance to this present study.

*Learning Theories*

Learning Theories supporting "learning" in the learning persistence and success construct include but are not limited to: interaction, social interaction, constructivism, social constructivism, discourses, motivation and attribution and inquiry. Each theory and contributing researcher will be discussed further below.

*Interaction.* Online learning researchers have shown interaction to be a necessary component of online learning environments (Moore & Kearsley, 1995. The web-based course is ideally suited for mediating inquiry learning. Moore and Kearsley (1995) describe three kinds of instructional interaction in online learning environments: learner-learner, learner-teacher, and learner-content. Learner-learner and learner-teacher interactions are also integral components of inquiry learning; as a result, any online environments that provide for these will also provide for inquiry learning. Inquiry learning is a didactic strategy that uses questions to guide the learning process.

The use of interaction between and among learners, teachers, content, and technology, can increase the opportunity for learning. However, this can only happen if more attention is paid to the student's fears of communication technology.

*Social interaction.* The qualitative research study by Eastmond (1995) of distance learning students focused on interaction as a support mechanism to counteract the isolation of computer conferencing. Students separated by time and distance unexpectedly found togetherness online through computer conferencing. In addition, Eastmond learned that distance learning courses offered the opportunity to bring together diverse students and required them to share their thoughts and feelings, which exposed participant and societal differences through the learning process. His intent was to study

adult students' experiences and how these experiences converge or diverge within the group.

It is an active process in which learners interact with their environment, with the purpose of making sense of their environment and the information presented to them (Wilson & Lowry, 2000). This approach serves us well as members of society because we must continually assess new information, analyze it, and make decisions based on our meaning making. Online education is and will continue to be effective in offering new information and decision-making opportunities because of its time-independent, interactive, computer-mediated, and nondiscriminatory nature.

*Constructivism.* Constructivism is based on the notion that knowledge is "constructed" by the learner; it emphasizes the learner's role in constructing meaning to acquire knowledge. The online learner participants constructed a new understanding persistence construct as multigenerational and situational. How the learners perceive their role, as a successful persistent learner was uncovered through the data analysis. Constructivism represents a combination of several theories of learning, rather than just one (Driscoll, 2000). As such, it encompasses inquiry learning as well. Constructivism has also been called generative learning, embedded cognition, cognitive flexibility theory, and post-modern and post-structural curricula. Situated cognition, anchored instruction, problem-based learning, case-based learning, and collaborative learning also have underpinnings in constructivism. Thus, inquiry and discovery are also subsets of constructivism. The work of Burge (1998) is an example of a constructivist study that focuses on student persistence from a gender perspective.

Burge (1998) offers summary guidelines to address key issues such as participation, curricula, barriers, and technological application based on constructivist learning theory and strategies for teaching women. She focuses on how a learner takes responsibility for knowledge construction. Her basic guidelines come from an experienced female educator: (1) the faculty's initial contact should be a strong dose of tender loving care, and (2) if the faculty supports the student's decision to be in the course and the student's position as "knower," then the student's life experience will be acknowledged. Burge's work provides a detailed list of constructivist, women-friendly, and technology guidelines. Von Prunner (1999) corroborates Burge's suggestion that women should have support appropriate to their needs as distance learners.

Constructivism is one of the theoretical frameworks on which this study is based. While much persistence research comes from cognitive psychology, the learning persistence and success construct is based on constructivism and social constructivism theories.

*Social constructivism.* Socioconstructivists views emphasize the social influence on the individual's knowledge construction (Grendler, 1997). Others identify him as a psychological constructivist because they believe that Vygotsky's ultimate interests lie in the "inner psychological life of individuals" (Phillips, 1998, p. 153). Phillips reserved the term social constructivism for the discussion of how social, political, cultural, and economic elements affect the construction of an official knowledge system. Moore's theory of interaction—from the perspective of learner—to learner, learner to content, and learner to instructor--and the theoretical foundation for looking at distance learning are

grounded in social constructivism.  Social constructivist learning theory pervades the research on online learning.

*Discourse*.  Knowing what experiences a student has is insufficient; one must also know what those experiences mean to the student before judging the student's decision making and developing the necessary intervention for supporting students.  The social construction of meaning theory accounts for the relationship between socially constructed attitudinal variables in college/course experiences and the interaction that result in persistence (Stage & Hossler, 2002).  Another related theory that speaks to the relationship between social construction of meaning theory and persistence is social construction of reality.  Attinasi (1994) and Tierney (1992) discuss socially constructed reality.  Attinasi thought that an examination of narrative or interactive discourse of students' experiences should generate a grounded theory.

The discourse methodology of Robert M. Johnson, Jr., is predicated on the socially constructed reality of college students (Braxton et al., 1997).  Discourse methodology supports the possibility that socially constructed reality may influence persistence (Attinasi, 1989, 1994; Tierney, 1992).  Attinasi and Tierney believe that through discourse analysis and the use of the discourse tool, one can uncover group identities and culturally determined mechanisms for creating meaning from experiences and sharing those meanings.  Furthermore, they believe that, rather than focusing on attributes of persisting students, one can attend to the process of persistence by focusing on culture, cognition**,** and the structure of meaning shown in discourse.

A covert assumption of this study was that persistence might be socially constructed through discourse and that a positive discourse could influence online student persistence.

The appreciative inquiry interview questions helped to gather the discourse data needed to create an image developed from language that enabled grounded theory development and ultimately a motivating model.

*Sociocultural.* Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) assert that *learning* used as a noun and *knowledge* are terms that are discussed interchangeably. How individuals make their own meanings or construct their own knowledge is at the heart of the learning process. Meaning making in a given social situation of instruction is achieved in two ways: by social and cultural negotiation and by internal negotiation. Social negotiation concerns the process through which ideas are tested by alternative ideas. Duffy and Jonassen (1992, p. 11) see a conceptual link between constructivists' consideration of social negotiation and Vygotsky's term of *inter-psychological interaction*. Internal negotiation is similar to Vygotsky's term of *intra-psychological interaction* (Shin, 1991). My study, based on constructivist theory identified the type of interactions that students perceive to be helpful for their learning persistence and success. "Learning" in the construct of learning persistence and success is defined as a socially situated cognitive function developed through the process of intra-psychological interaction within oneself and inter-psychological interaction with others to create meanings and new knowledge (Vygotski, 1978).

Constructivism and social constructivism have contributed to the practice of education in several ways. Faculty subscribing to constructivism and social

constructivism may focus more on participation in the class and the cultural composition of the class. Most importantly, constructivism has brought educators an interest in student active roles in the exchange of teaching and learning, and the recognition that learning is a social activity (Phillips, 1998, p. 11). The "learning" component in learning persistence and success construct is created from the preceding description of learning theory from a constructivist and social constructivist framework.

New constructs about the reasons to persist are introduced and revisited during the learning process. The sociocultural theories of learning of Vygotsky (1978) indicate that the tools of learning (which include language, dialogue, and thought) have embedded in them values, ways of focusing, ways of determining what is irrelevant, and ways of knowing. Learning will be discussed further in the section on inquiry. Values and beliefs are challenged and modified based on the level of social construction of meaning, possibly from lower to higher levels. For this reason, it is important to review literature on distance learning as it relates to learning persistence.

*Motivation and attribution.* Online course design must take into account the student's motivation and the attributions necessary for success. Students and teachers need to understand the importance of attributing student learning to the shared meanings created through online inquiry and conversational activities. Motivation and attribution theory, proposed by the social psychological research of David Weiner, provides some explanation for persistence in online courses.

Weiner (1986) proposes that students' two most prevalent concerns are achievement success and social acceptance. Self-esteem is developed through experiences of competence and incompetence in the achievement domain and by

acceptance and rejection in the interpersonal arena. Twelve principles outlined by Weiner (1986) form the foundation for motivation and attribution theory. This theory provides a recognized working model that has been used to study student achievement activities.

Attributions are mental models representing the world and how it operates that are used to make predictions about reality. Internal mental models of the world influence learning and behavior. Attributions or causal explanations tell us what a person thinks about events and their causes. Attributions are beliefs about causality. They are a way of classifying or categorizing thoughts about events and their causes. An attribution is any answer to the question "Why?"

Attributions can be internal or external. That is, an action that is observed can be attributed to internal or external causes. Making an external attribution involves identifying the cause of the observed behavior as some aspect of the situation or environment. By contrast, an internal cause is related to the personal features of someone's internal characteristics. An attribution is defined as internal only when the cause is an individual difference or personality variable. If any reasonable person would have acted in the same way under the prevailing circumstances, we make an external attribution.

Attributions have five dimensions: stability, global, internal, personal, and controllability. Stability refers to whether the cause can change in a short or long timeframe, for example, a teacher giving a difficulty test. Global refers to whether the event or characteristic is perceived as likely to affect other outcomes or just one activity; for example, receiving a low score on an IQ test might affect overall academic

performance. Personal refers to whether the characteristic is unique or particular to that person. Controllability refers to whether the person could have done anything about the outcome.

It is important to this study's AI research framework to introduce the principles of attribution to research designers and online course designers. The practical implications of motivation and attribution theory can be directly applied to online course design for higher-level learning and student persistence. Changing beliefs is the covert goal of this study. Those students who continued to be successful attributed an unstable cause of things like poor network connections or computer learning curves, and they continued to work actively to overcome the barriers they faced.

Therefore, motivational and attributional theories are important; people's belief in the potential for change determines how likely they are to maintain a high degree of effort, which is the overall goal of the study. Changing people's attributions for success and failure can affect both their behavioral and emotional reactions. Encouraging a belief in internal factors like ability and effort can encourage people to be more satisfied with the outcome, if they succeed. However, if they attribute failure to the same internal causes, this may lead to loss of self-esteem and lack of motivation. The relationship between attribution and motivation provides support for this study and has practical applications for the study and the choice of AI method. The purpose of this study is to discover an encouraging language and provocative proposal to share with the online learning community. The way to gather information on students' motivations and attributions is inquiry.

*Learning Persistence and Success Construct in Online Courses Summary*

This section of chapter 2 has reviewed the research literature pertaining to the proposed learning persistence and success construct from a variety of theoretical frameworks.  This study, however, is based on a social constructivist, constructivist, and positive psychology framework.  Some researchers focus on the effect of the social cultural context and culture, while others focus on the individual's self esteem, independence, motivation, attribution, and control.  All agree that student support, educational design and delivery, and interaction have a strong influence on retention, persistence toward course completion, graduation, and success.  A study inquiring into the factors that have the greatest effect on persistence in online courses, as described by those who persist, would add clarity to this complex topic.

Each facet of the learning persistence and success construct was more fully understood through the research findings of this study; the foundations were derived from the theories discussed in the previous topics of learning, motivation and attribution, and discourse. The last section of this chapter explains purpose of using inquiry and particularly appreciative inquiry theory.

Appreciative Inquiry

*Inquiry.*  Inquiry serves as an intervention, learning tool, and research method. The construct of learning persistence and success is grounded in inquiry theory using Appreciative Inquiry as a methodology. Inquiry learning has its roots in Socratic dialogue, in which self-knowledge is acquired through aggressive questioning (Exline, 2003).  One of the first to advocate inquiry-based learning was Dewey (1916, 1938).  He thought education had to be grounded in experience (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999[not in

References]; Driscoll, 2000) and called for the integration of subjects (e.g., math, science, and social studies) and curricular change to remove conventional subjects from schools. He also showed that children benefited from direct activity-based experience in his Chicago laboratory school (Dewey, 1916).

Piaget also contributed to the conceptual framework of inquiry learning. He emphasized both qualitative developmental changes in cognition, culminating in higher-order abstract thinking, and the active construction of knowledge, meaning that learners actively make meaning to gain knowledge (Driscoll, 2000). He believed that experience and prior knowledge determined this meaning making.

Bruner, the father of the concept of discovery learning, believed that the outcome of all cognitive development was thinking, which is affected by the interaction between the learner, experiences, and the environment (for example, culture) (Bruner 1966, 1973). He believed that discovery learning would allow for this interactivity and for cognitive development (Driscoll, 2000). These ideas are also basic premises of inquiry-based learning.

Like Bruner, Vygotsky sought to understand knowledge acquisition (i.e., learning) based on cognitive development and emphasized interaction. He believed that an individual could learn from others because, often, others put the individual in a zone of proximal development (ZPD); this represents the gap in knowledge between what the individual knows and what the individual is capable of knowing (Vygotsky, 1978). Problem solving and questioning are an integral part of this ZPD (Driscoll, 2000). Vygotsky believed that learning could occur only within this ZPD. These same

components of interaction, prior knowledge, and problem solving are important in inquiry learning.

Gagné's learning outcomes (especially intellectual skills and cognitive strategies) are also related to Bruner's and Vygotsky's learning theories, in that higher-order rules are used to solve problems and prior knowledge and creative thinking are important in both defining the problems and finding the solutions. These aspects of his theory of instruction relate it to inquiry-based learning (Gagné, 1985).

Costa (2003) describes inquiry learning as the methodology of constructivism and the delivery system that makes constructivism happen. The main assumption in this theory is that knowledge is constructed by learners based on their past experiences. Additionally, the reality of the learners may not reflect the reality of their world. However, as they learn, they will contrast their view with that of others to determine its validity (Driscoll, 2000). "Problem solving, reasoning, critical thinking, and active and reflective use of knowledge constitute the goals of constructivist learning" (Driscoll, 2000, p. 382). Those are also the goals of inquiry/discovery learning. Online learning has the capability of greatly enhancing inquiry-based learning and of removing many of the criticisms about its use.

Technology is still not completely accepted by all teachers and is not available in all situations. For these reasons, the increased use of online learning to enhance inquiry learning may be slow.

Integration of online resources to enhance inquiry will require a radical shift in both teaching style and the teacher's vision of what classroom life is all about.…This new vision is one that changes the teacher's role in basic ways, reducing the importance

of "chalk and talk," increasing the need for sensitivity to individual students' problems and achievements, shifting how classrooms are laid out, how evaluation is conducted, how teachers relate to their colleagues, and a hundred other particulars of daily life.… (Kerr, 1996, p. 24)

These are the same barriers, beliefs, teaching methods, and assessment procedures that affect inquiry learning. These issues should be addressed using methods similar in scope to inquiry learning: modeling, reflection, and collaboration (Ertmer, 1999). Only when teachers themselves become true inquiry learners will they completely embrace inquiry learning and the technology that enhances its success. Cooperrider & Srivastas (1987) says that one of the principles of inquiry is that it is heliotropic; that is, what we inquire into is the direction that we focus on and move toward.

Inquiry not only plays a crucial role in learning theory but also may influence the decision and motivation to persist. My study used appreciative inquiry as a research methodology as well as one of its methods. A more complete discussion of why appreciative inquiry is my method of choice is included in the methodology chapter of this study. See Appendix A, tables 1-8 for more models and theories influencing learning persistence and success construct.

*Appreciative inquiry methodology.* The purpose of this section literature review is to build a theoretical framework for the use of appreciative inquiry (AI) as a research methodology for my research study. This section of chapter 2 presents an overview of relevant research literature concerning the use of appreciative inquiry as not only a framework for organizational development and research but also as a qualitative action

research method for the development of grounded theory, models, emerging conceptual frameworks, and data for organizational and cultural change.

This section is organized to provide evidence for AI as an emerging research methodology, not just as an organizational change process, and therefore a viable method to answer my research questions. Part I describes the scope of the topic, and the theories, models, case studies, and organizational change cases that are the historical foundation of AI. Part I concludes with AI's phenomenological assumptions.

Part II focuses on inquiry as a research method. It describes the research studies that have used AI as a methodology. It then discusses the theoretical frameworks, qualitative and quantitative methods, data collection, data analysis, and the results of using AI as a research method. It also discusses the challenges of switching from AI's intended purpose of organizational development to data collection and analysis.

Finally, Part II presents a conditional proposal for how to use AI for research. It provides a rationale for using AI as a research methodology that is robust enough in its findings and similar enough in process and theoretical framework to action research to be considered acceptable as a research method for certain research questions.

*Part I.  Historical Background*

In the past 20 years, qualitative research methods have grown in importance and respect as a useful and valid form of inquiry. This is especially true as researchers have explored twenty-first century complex human systems from multiple perspectives (Creswell, 1994). Qualitative research is regularly being used for grounded theory building, action research, ethno-methodology, phenomenological inquiry, and participative research. The scope of this literature review includes, but is not limited to,

handbooks on qualitative research and AI, articles and organizational development case studies, how-to books on AI, dissertation research findings, and research using AI.

AI is grounded in qualitative research and inquiry.  The edited works by Reason (1988) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) describe the development of a new research paradigm and articles on specific inquiry methodologies.  These works provide historical and phenomenological background for appreciative inquiry

> The New Paradigm Research Manifesto was that research could now be a method… supporting or questioning social forces, both by content and method.  It involves a closer relationship of the researcher and the researched…a mutual activity involving co-ownership and shared power…to both the process and product of research.  Knowing and action are intertwined. New Paradigm Research creates the world to be studied. It helps people to flourish and increases self-determination. It seeks knowledge, which can be used in life. Behind the old paradigm is a one-sided objectivity. The new paradigm is a synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity. The outcome of research is knowledge. (Reason, 1988)

Reason continued to develop this "New Paradigm" by expanding the premises of the Manifesto for research and inquiry.  Herron (1988, and Krim (1988), make a much a stronger case for the purpose of inquiry.  They see a shift from research paradigms to cooperative inquiry, which is not research. Instead, the purposes of inquiry are for:

- Development of new professional practice
- Liberation of the disadvantaged
- Exploration of human experience

- Institutional changes and development

- Development of theory

This range of purposes argues that human inquiry is a way of generating academic knowledge and developing a holistic understanding for worthy actions in human situations. Reason and Hawkins (1981) describe how story telling can be used. Heron (1988) used cooperative inquiry to explore altered states of consciousness. Inquiry appears to expand the boundaries of research in both purpose and topic.

The articles from prominent qualitative researchers collected by Denzin and Lincoln (1994and the article by Schawndt (1994) describe the differences between constructivist and interpretivist research as positive versus negative directions. Schawndt discusses objective versus subjective realities, the known and the unknown, and the social versus the individual knowing of ideas. The construction of knowledge and truth is that which is created not discovered because no real world pre-exists independent of mental activities. In the 4D model, AI uses discovery in the first phase and creation in the following three phases of dream, design, and destiny.

AI is both a process and a philosophy. As a process, AI has phases and steps. As a philosophy, it emphasizes social construction of knowledge through collaboration, inclusion, participation, and inquiry. The major belief underlying AI is that what we believe to be real is a construction of our own making through anticipatory thinking…about what will or won't occur. AI is basically a conversation through storytelling, interviews, and discussion of themes. Researchers like Fontana and Frey (1994), Reason (1988), and c] support dialog and communication as a research methodology.

Schawndt (1994) believes in using unstructured interviews as a good way to gain a better understanding of complex behaviors. Fontana and Frey (1994) expand on the topic of interviews by discussing the fact that the language of interviews can create shared meaning. Reason (1988) describes the importance of oral histories, creative interviewing, structured and unstructured interviewing, and nonverbal communication. He breaks out the types of group interviews and purposes for each. This in-depth study of interviewing not only provides a rationale for using interviews in AI but also, and more importantly, shows how consistent AI's processes are with current qualitative research methods.

Qualitative research literature appears to strongly support the methodology inherent in AI, which is based on interviews, stories, positive directions, and image development. In addition, the writers discussed in the preceding paragraphs support AI's theoretical framework of constructionism.

*Part II. Research Using Appreciative Inquiry*

Through online and library research on appreciative inquiry, I found 8 AI methodology dissertations out of 91 dissertations that studied or used AI. The other 83 studies used AI as their framework or made some reference to AI. Only one or two research articles used AI in a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative research methods for research and not just for organizational development. The AI studies using quantitative analysis used methods ranging from statistical analysis of the interview data and structured analysis of stories, to multivariate analysis and coefficient variance. The qualitative analysis methods overwhelmingly reported using grounded theory, narrative analysis, and theme and clustering systems. Only the dissertation research by

Cooperrider (1986) used predominantly quantitative methods of multivariate analysis. The other researchers used qualitative data collection methods like action research, narrative theory, inquiry design, participatory inquiry, comparative study design, surveys, questionnaires, storytelling, focus groups, and search conferencing. Whether researchers used qualitative or quantitative methods, AI has been used successfully for data collection purposes and the data analyzed qualitatively using grounded theory through a theme clustering system. About half of the studies chose to use quantitative data analysis. Therefore, AI has been used not only as a theoretical framework for appreciative inquiries but also as the inquiry methodology itself. This study uses an AI as a framework and inquiry method.

One of the differences between using AI as an organizational change intervention and as a research method lies in the purpose and method of analyzing the data. In the dissertation abstracts reviewed, the researchers' purpose and questions drove their choice of methods. The purpose of academic research is the creation of theories, models, and frameworks to increase understanding. AI research appears to be most compatible with organizational development and innovation. AI is a generative process of search and discovery using the AI multiple research methods of action research and theory, comprehensive surveys, as well as face-to-face interviews for data collection and grounded theory to discover new positive-based constructs. AI was selected for this study because it is a generative process, which uses a variety of methods. This study used face-to-face interviews, and threaded discussions for data collection to discover an understanding for a new positive-based model of learning persistence and success.

*AI principles*.  The handbook by Cooperrider**,** Whitney, and Stravos (2003) describes eight AI principles.  The handbook begins with the social constructivist principle that meaning is created by the group's joint responses to the inquiry.  As a result, AI becomes both an academic inquiry tool and a practical tool for organizational development.  Cooperrider and Srivastas (1987) describe AI as a research study of how social forms cohere and evolve.  The AI core principles and questions naturally work as a unit to create the motivation and inspiration needed for action as a result of the reflections.  The other significant principles will be discussed later.  Cooperrider (2003) glossary of Appreciative inquiry terms can be seen in Appendix C, table 1.

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) added three more AI principles: wholeness, enactment, and free choice.  These last three principles move AI to a process of collaboration, self-determination, and self-responsibility.  The AI principles are what differentiate AI from other types of positive inquiries.  Using AI as a research methodology implies using the AI principles.

*AI research topics*.  The review of AI research revealed a broad range of topics, from the abstract--like understanding innovation (Cooperrider & Srivastas, 1987), to working in teams and resolving organizational crisis (Bechtold, 2002).  The AI topics for dissertation abstracts included, but were not limited to, the disciplines of health care, business, sociology, psychology, organizational growth, and international business.

The research theoretical frameworks all included some type of social, collaborative basis.  However, the predominant theoretical frameworks were social constructivist and constructivist.  I also found critical socio-relational, emergent organizational, normative narrative, and generative theories.

The works by Cooperrider et al. (2003) and Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003)

describe the fifth AI principle, positive questions lead to positive change.  This principle

points to the role of positive questions as both a framework for inquiry and a change

agent process.  The purpose of my study is to use grounded theory to create a theory that

serves as a change agent for increased learning persistence and success.

AI's power is grounded in scientific research.  Using brain research and positive

psychology as a theoretical basis, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) describe how

storytelling--from the perspective of the past, present, and future--anchors topics into

experience and imagination.  This offers credibility and a partial methodology for AI data

collection.   The generative nature of AI, combined with the anticipatory constructivist

principle forges a unique, multidimensional research method that transforms themes into

action strategies as they are discovered.  As a result, this study's choice of AI as a

research method should create dynamic action strategies for student learning persistence

and success, as they are discovered through the research.

*Results of the AI Research Methods*

The highlights of the AI research are found in the dissertation from Case Western

University by Cooperrider (1986), in which he developed five AI principles as essential

to the process.   In addition, as a result of the dissertation by Berge (2003) at the

University of Saskatchewan, a definitional leadership model was created that included

leader development, education, and training.

These dissertation results show a range of possible research products, ranging

from theories, models, conceptual relationships, and new understandings in

organizational behavior and human dynamics to themes used for organizational cultural

change.  The types of results that can be derived by using AI as a research methodology appear to be consistent with the goals of the New Paradigm.  AI adds a new perspective to issues facing companies, serves as a method to unify staff, and provides a source of energy for creative ideas.

*Similarities and Differences of AI for Organizational Development and Research*

There are many similarities as well as differences in using AI for organizational development and for research.  This chapter will expand on several of these topics.  The journals of Preskill and Coghlan (2003) present an argument for using appreciative inquiry in evaluation. Many of the arguments for using AI in evaluation also apply to using AI for research.  Rogers and Fraser (2003) identify how useful AI can be if it is implemented properly, and discuss how seductive AI is as a causal model.  They discuss how certain AI principles, such as the heliotropic principle, energize organizations and people.  They outline the best time for implementing AI and the conditions that make it most useful.  In addition, they firmly believe that fidelity to AI when conducting an evaluation is an important issue.   The heliotropic principle is very relevant to my study in that the goal of the study is to further our understanding of the learning persistence and success construct and thereby giving it a positive meaning.  This new understanding and meaning will hopefully have a heliotropic effect on distance learning students learning persistence and success. New provocative proposition were discovered through the grounded theory.

Patton (2003) believes that the paradigm underlying AI is an approach that leads to organizational learning and creating.  He cautions that researchers must be clear about what is meant by evaluation before deciding whether AI can or cannot be used in

evaluation, and for which purposes. This caution also holds true for using AI for research and inquiry.

Bushe (1998) looks at the emotional consequences of using AI. He is concerned that AI will become fashionable and can be corrupted, just like other organizational development (OD) interventions. He writes that systems with deep, unexpressed resentment will not tolerate AI as an OD intervention. Repression can negatively affect the positive zealot. Talking about a positive future opens people up to potential ridicule. This warning also holds true for researchers using AI as a methodology. Finally, Bushe compliments AI's use of storytelling as a way to mitigate somewhat the problems just described.

Bushe discusses AI as an analysis from the heart that heals, as opposed to types of analysis from the head that dissect problems logically. Analytical forms of action research cut up an organization or group for analysis focus on problems and differences based on the researcher's theoretical goals. If carried out with an open heart, AI can add health and vitality to relationships in the system. Bushe believes that the key to creating change in organizations is creating new theories, ideas, and images that people within the system use in everyday conversation. According to Bushe, AI's growth depends on the development of good theory and good practice.

*Purpose of AI research.* As discussed in Part I, Reason (1988) proposes that there are more purposes for research than just the development of theory, cooperative inquiry, and participatory inquiry. Research has often been used for institutional change and development, exploration of human experience, liberation, and development of practice. The purpose of my study is to develop theory that can be useful to the online learning

community.  Given that my research parallels my work as Achievement Coach at the community college under study, it is like action research.  The difference is that I did not conduct the research as part of my work.

New action research approaches include participatory action research, action learning, and AI.  Newman and Fitzgerald (2001) and Reason (1988) expand action research toward more collaborative, systematic, and transformational efforts.  However, the outcome of research is still knowledge.  Fetterman (2001), Reason (1988), Greene (1994), and many others believe that knowledge should be created collaboratively and used for empowerment purposes.  Cooperrider and Srivastas (1987) call AI a form of action research that attempts to create new theories, ideas, and images for the purpose of changing the system developmentally.

As this study's researcher, I take responsibility for clarifying what this study means by research.  This qualitative study defines research as an appreciative inquiry where the data were analyzed through grounded theory.  Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stravos (2003) would say that the responsibility lies with the AI practitioner.  Clarity of purpose is essential for successful large-group AI work because the purpose of the effort affects the design work.

*Data analysis*.  Another issue that must be addressed when considering use of AI as a data analysis method is how to identify the themes.  In OD, AI usually involves a team that reviews the data from the discovery and dream phases.  The AI team members continue to look at the elements and concepts to identify the key themes, key ingredients to build and sustain loyalty.  Open dialogue and stories support the themes.  The propositions describe the desired organizational qualities, processes, and systems created

in the dream phase to help guide the organization to higher purposes. The resulting

provocative possibilities stretch and challenge grounded theory in the organization's

collective history. Provocative possibilities are balanced affirmative, social, architectural,

participative, and intergenerational statements (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stravos, 2003).

The research described previously used AI as a methodology.  The researchers

took raw data from the discovery and dream phase and used both qualitative and

quantitative processes such as grounded theory, inquiry design, structural analysis; theme

cluster systems, multivariate analysis, and comparative study design for their data

analysis.  The purpose of their research projects included theory and model development,

liberation, action orientation, and knowledge development.  These researchers were able

to use AI data to expand on knowledge of the field and the participants' knowledge.  At

the same time, they maintained the integrity of AI and its principles.

This study used three of the four phases of the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D model,

Discovery, Dream and Design to meet the unique challenges of data collection for this

educational research. Cooperrider and Whitney at the Corporation for Positive Change

have successfully applied AI to education and social change efforts. The initial data

review used an AI positive framework to organize the data.  Appreciative inquiry is a

qualitative method of data collection that supports the inductive iterative nature and goals

of grounded theory to generate theory and meanings.  Creswell (1998, p.56) describes the

process of data collection for grounded theory as one where the typical researcher

conducts 20-30 interviews based on several "visits to the field" to collect interview data

to saturate the categories. A category represents a unit of information. While the

researcher collects the data he or she begins the analysis and continues making

adaptations as the interviews continue. The participants are theoretically chosen to help

the researcher form the best theory.  The AI process of data collections process in this

study was similar to the grounded theory process in that there 30 interviews from face-to-

face meetings, or threaded discussion, the AI interview guide was designed to capture the

categories of information on learning, persistence and success from the student's

perspective. In addition, the student participants were from a convenience sample of

learners in online classes. Their data helped to form provocative propositions about

learning persistence and success based on what students perceive help them to persist.

The data collected drove the type of grounded theory analysis selected. The

theoretical coding methods of open coding, constant comparative coding, selective

coding and types of conditional matrix as described (Glaser, 2005; and Berg, 2004, p.

286) were explored for use in this study to develop the grounded theory. Berg (2004)

Stage Model of Qualitative Content Analysis follows the standard grounded theory

analysis method which begins with a research question, and moves to determining

analytical categories and using open and axial coding when reading through the data and

establishing grounded categories.  The information were segmented into categories. Then

the researcher created subcategories based on identified properties and looked at the data

to show extreme possibilities.  These steps led to determining objective criteria of

selection for sorting data chunks into analytical and grounded categories.  The researcher

reviewed and sorted the data into various categories and revised the categories or

selection criteria as needed.  The entries were then counted in each category for

descriptive data and to show magnitude and organized by emphasis level to adjust for the

various types of data collection. Finally, the patterns were considered in light of the

relevant literature and or theories and an explanation of the findings and related literature given**.** The data in this study was systematically analyzed using the standard format that was most appropriate for the categories and unit of measurement that was generated from the data.

*Conclusion*

The main obstacles to using AI as a research methodology involve the researcher and the researcher's skills. The following eight cautions apply.

1. The researcher must be clear of the purpose for the research.

2. The researcher must be skillful with implementation and its collaborative data collection process.

3. The researcher must be aware of the setting of the research and the openness of the participants.

4. Participants must be open to the AI process and information. Participation must be a free choice.

5. The researcher must be knowledgeable about how to code and develop themes, which must be corroborated by the advisory committee.

6. Participants need to review and verify the findings.

7. The researcher must be knowledgeable about the social constructivist theory in action.

8. The researcher must be aware of repressed negativity against the positive future thinking.

When implemented properly and for the right reasons, AI principles are transformational, both conceptually and practically.  A researcher who chooses AI has

opened a Pandora's box of energy, future desires, hope, power, and potential. It appears

that AI research results can be reviewed and used faster than most other types of research

(Bushe, 1999). Therefore, the researcher should take the Pandora's box effect into

account when analyzing and disseminating the data. Only studies whose purpose is to

use the knowledge gained from the collection process should attempt to use AI as a

methodology. This study used appreciative inquiry for data collection taking into

account the eight cautions listed above and the resulting themes used for greater

understanding of the construct.

*Appreciative Inquiry Summary*

The literature reviewed in this section has presented an overview of relevant

research literature concerning the use of appreciative inquiry as not only a framework for

organizational development and research but also as a qualitative action research method

for the development of grounded theory, models, emerging conceptual frameworks, and

data for organizational and cultural change. It has shown that collaborative, participatory,

action research, and grounded theory approaches are most commonly used in both OD

change and qualitative research that try to stretch beyond the comfortable data collection

processes, while maintaining validity. Based on the interpretations of the research and

literature reviewed, it appeared that this study could appropriately use appreciative

inquiry as a data collection method and grounded theory for analysis. This study used it

for the right purpose, with free choice, proper implementation, and an awareness of its

positive transformational powers. Understanding persistence through inquiry was best

facilitated by the appreciative inquiry research methodology because the research

questions data were crafted based on AI principles, which resulted in themes, new understandings, positive propositions and a theoretical model.

<p style="text-align:center">Literature Supporting Findings</p>

*Transformative Learning*:  Mezirow (2000) suggests that individuals can be transformed through a process called critical reflection, in his theory of transformative learning.  The catalysts for transformative learning are "disorienting dilemmas," situations that do not fit one's preconceived notions. These dilemmas prompt critical reflection and the development of new ways of interpreting experiences.  Less dramatic predicaments, such as those created by a teacher and/or online course, also promote transformation.  Transformative learning involves reflectively transforming the beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions that constitute our meaning schemes. Mezirow (1981) believes that this happens through a series of phases that begin with a disorienting dilemma and pass through several other phases, ending in integration of the new perspective into the person's life. As students became oriented to online learning, they began to be critically reflective about the level of responsibility and effort it required (Mezirow, 2000). The theory of transformative learning which includes critical reflection suggests that when students understand and take on the needed level of responsibility, and make the effort to be more organized, they could increase their potential for learning persistence and success and experience transformational learning.

The theory of Herrmann (1988, p.9) – that the transformative process of learning is introduced to the institutional culture as "re-socialization," suggests that students make a transition from their identities as non-students or face-to-face students to distance learning students.  Herrmann's (1988, p9) theory may help to explain the contextual

vision phenomenon found in the parent and foreign student groups. Some participants made the transition from their role as mother or foreigner to distance learning student by conceptually creating an image and acting "as if" they were in a classroom. In addition, some faculty participants described imagining that they were talking to the student, not to the computer.  Both students and faculty used mental imagery in their online classes. The re-socialization aspect of transformative process may indicate that some visualization could help students' transition from their present-moment setting into the online class, with its distance learning behaviors and characteristics.

*Optimism:*  The research findings suggest that the level of connection between student intentions or desires and their attributed possibility of reaching those intentions through online courses is what could increase the coping skills (Gibson, 1998) and the optimism (Seligman, 1990) necessary to persist.  Optimism Theory explored by (Seligman, 1990) based on a positive psychological framework, is consistent with AI theory. It is one way to interpret the best practice data from the participant stories that was not in necessary prior to conducting the research.

*Generational Study:*  Nickels et al. (1994) says that members of generations such as baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), and Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1994) are linked through shared life experiences in their formative years, usually the first 10 years of life.  What you learn and believe as a child affects how you view risk and challenge, authority, teachers, technology, relationships, careers, and economics. For the most part, baby boomers were raised in families with unprecedented economic prosperity, parents with secure jobs, and optimism about the future.  The Generation Xers were raised in dual-career families with

parents who focused on work. As children, they attended day care or became latchkey

kids. Their parents' successive layoffs added to their insecurity about having lifelong

jobs.  Their best asset is their ability to give feedback, especially positive feedback, and

they expect more feedback themselves.  The Generation Yers (20-26 age range) in this

study are entering the professional workforce now. As a group, Generation Yers tend to

share a number of common characteristics, especially the demand for feedback once or

twice a year in performance reviews or elsewhere.  They're considered impatient,

skeptical, blunt, expressive, image driven, and inexperienced. The younger students in

this study fit the Generation Yer's description of being adaptable, tech savvy, able to

grasp new concepts, practiced at multitasking, efficient, and tolerant, with a sense of

commitment (Nickels et al., 1994, pp. 320-322).  In general, this information provided

helpful supporting data to the study's findings. In addition, the findings of this study were

consistent with (Nickels et al., 1994).

*Employees of the Future:*  According to the *Office of the Future: 2020*, six skills

will be needed to prepare for success in a future of increasing ability to work from

anywhere: analysis with good judgment, collaboration and team building, technical

aptitude of selection and effective use of tools, intuition and adapting to the needs and

work styles of others, ongoing education, and negotiation to produce positive results

(Williams et al., 2005).  This supports the topic of creating employees of the future. By

helping students to be successful and to persist in online classes, educational institutions

will help the community have workers of the future.

*Social Construction Theory and AI Principles:*  Social constructionism posits that

human communication is the central process (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).  AI's

theoretical basis in social construction and constructionism holds that social interaction is the key process that transforms realities. Social construction and image theory, which suggests that the images we hold and share of the future, influence the decisions we make and the actions we take in the present. AI's unique focus on stories and images of the future, and the resulting collective image held by a group, is one of the most untapped resources for organizational change (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). AI anticipatory principle "images inspire action" says that human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. Whitney & Trosten-Bloom (2003) posit that the more positive and hopeful is the image of the future, the more positive is the present day action. This study's faculty and student interview data were supported by the social construction theory through the faculty and students' stories.

## Summary of Literature Review

The literature review for this study discussed retention and persistence theories in face-to-face courses. Distance learning in online courses, distance learner characteristics and persistence in distance learning literature showed that there is a gap in the literature. Most research has been from a problem-based framework but there was no online persistence research using an Appreciative Inquiry approach. The researcher pulled from the wide variety of persistence research factors studied to date to build a construct of learning persistence and success that would help to make the transition from a framework of drop out and persistence framework to a positive conceptual framework of learning to success and success to persistence. In addition, this literature review examined the use of appreciative inquiry as a research method and approach. The literature supporting the findings included transformational learning, generational differences, optimism, social

construction and future employment.  As a result of the literature, this research used an appreciative approach to grounded theory method to study online learner persistence and success in online courses.

# CHAPTER III

# METHODS

This study attempted the following grand tour goals:  At a theoretical level, the researcher wanted to develop is a theory of learning persistence and success in community college online courses, in order to bridge the gap between deficit-based retention theories, that focus on drop outs and appreciative inquiry-based persistence theories which provide a positive framework for looking at learning persistence and success.  At a practical level, I wanted to find out from students, and faculty, the stories, perceptions, themes, and language that encourage learning persistence and success in online courses.  This study's goal was to transcend from the problem- and solution-based retention theories and models, to a positive, possibility-based theory and model. The new positive model would help to energize the online community of learners to take a leap conceptually and practically into the possible future of online learner persistence and success.  On a personal level, this study followed on an eight-year personal and professional interest in increasing the learning persistence and success of community college learners.  It was a stepping-stone toward further studies in online education and learning.

## Research Questions

This grounded theory qualitative study explored the following research questions:

- What general themes emerge from an appreciative inquiry of online learning persistence and success with community college online students?

- What understanding or meaning emerges about learning persistence and success in online courses?

- What provocative proposal of learning persistence and success in online courses emerges from the data?

- What theory explains online learning persistence and success?

These research questions were developed from an appreciative framework where the interview questions were crafted to evoke success stories that provided the data from which the themes emerged. Then from those themes the researcher developed an understanding of what learning persistence and success in online courses meant to the students. Finally a provocative proposal was generated from the themes using the participants' words and researcher understanding of the student's perceptions as well as the literature on persistence, online learning and appreciative inquiry.

*Rationale for an Appreciative Inquiry Study on Persistence in Online Learning*

I wanted to learn what helps students in online classes learn the content, finish their courses, take other courses, and get a passing or higher grade. This study refers to this phenomenon as "learning persistence and success."

There are limited qualitative research studies and positive psychology theory-based research into the factors that increase persistence and retention in online courses. Quantitative research study findings and problem-based retention theories, models, and interventions that have failed to arrest concern about low retention rates and success rates in distance learning courses are many. Faculty and educational institutions have implemented numerous retention models over the past 20 or more years and still have questions about how to increase persistence in students.

Educational research needs to emphasize the context within which studied activities occur and the meanings of those activities. Qualitative research methods

address these needs, and the inquiry approach leads to more fruitful findings.  Human

inquiry is not only a way of generating academic knowledge but also a way to enhance

personal and professional practice.  Human inquiry has a holistic purpose of developing

understanding of worthy actions in human situations.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a type of inquiry using storytelling.  Reason &

Hawkins (1981) describe how storytelling can be used for inquiry.  Cooperrider (1997)

developed the appreciative inquiry theory through his 1986 doctoral dissertation.  Since

then, it has been used for organizational change activities and to explore altered states of

consciousness (Heron, 1988).  Appreciative inquiry appears to expand the boundaries of

research in purpose and topic.  Cooperrider (2001) talks about inquiry giving life to living

systems through anticipatory realities and positive images. He believes that sociocultural

and sociocognitive research are converging around one thesis: that little collective action

is pre-programmed and that ideas are always being challenged by inquiry.  From a social

constructivist viewpoint, the possibilities are infinite.

The unique teaching/learning situation of online courses for community college

students merited an appreciative inquiry qualitative research design.  Such a design took

into account the contextual elements and positive images, uncovered best practices, and

allowed for inductive grounded theory generation.  Why do students persist in taking

online courses when their grades are declining?  What characteristics in the course, the

faculty, and the learning community as a social system encourage student persistence and

success?  Are there qualities about the students who choose to be in online courses that

create a higher-functioning community of learners?  Understanding the phenomenon of

learning persistence and success requires understanding the course context, and student

perceptions, values, characteristics, and behaviors. Using the qualitative research method of appreciative inquiry for data collection of stories, I intended to learn from students, and teachers, the factors that promoted learning persistence and success in online community college courses.

This topic is complicated and multifaceted. Unlike a quantitative study, it cannot be limited to a few variables and the ways they affect each other. A qualitative study will provide the rich answers that may shed light on the complex topic of persistence in online courses.

*Purpose*

The purpose of this study was to generate a theory of learning persistence and success in online courses that is based on appreciative inquiry. For my dissertation, I proposed to use appreciative inquiry qualitative method for data collection and grounded theory method for analysis because I wanted an understanding and theory of learning persistence and success based on a positive paradigm. For the purpose of this study, grounded theory is defined as theory generated from data systematically obtained and analyzed through the constant comparison method (Creswell, 1998.) The link between grounded theory and AI is a theoretically based inquiry method focusing on the positive. The principles of AI guide the inquiry in a direction that builds on what is working well. The use of AI in this study influenced the participants to succeed and persist as indicated in Chapter IV's findings. Grounded theory as an analysis method offered the openness and rigor needed to generate the theory. In brief, AI was used a tool to solicit best practice stories and data and grounded theory for the analysis.

There were some changes to the AI questions needed to accommodate the open question style of grounded theory. As a result the researcher used a both positive and open question approach to remedy the differences in perspectives. The questions were all positively based but there was opportunity for other opinions or no opinion on each topic. This minor addition to the AI guide allowed for more conversation and new perspectives to arise, which is the goal of grounded theory. AI seeks to discover and grounded theory seeks to uncover and from that data to identify new conceptual relationships which later result in theory. Grounded theory method helps to create new understandings and theory. But AI data is not used to develop theory. Rather it is used to form collaboratively created images that draw people to a new understanding of what is possible which leads people to action. Therefore, AI is a good data collection tool that generates a type of grounded theory. The AI grounded theory is positive and future oriented.

I used two sources of data to collect online student information: face-to-face-/telephone interviews, and online threaded discussion. I used whichever method was most comfortable for the student participants to share their stories. I looked for the emic voices of those who have silently found the answers to how to persist and succeed in online classes, which is consistent with qualitative researchers (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Finally, I collected supporting educational materials such as grades and persistence data on the participants to prove documentation on the effect of the AI interview questions on student grades and persistence.

*Procedure*

The data collection site was Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This site was selected because I have been employed at the

college for eight years as the Achievement Coach in the Business & Information Technology Division (BIT). BIT has the college's largest number of distance learning courses and faculty. The online students are adults with an average age of 27 who are taking credit courses for their certificate or associate degree, usually while working and caring for children. Faculty--experts in their business field--are trained and certified by the college to design and deliver online courses. Most of the courses in the division are offered both on-site and online. The college recently hired a distance-learning director to administer the program for almost 4,000 students across the college.

This site was also selected because it was accessible to online students, faculty, and staff through my role as achievement coach. College faculty were interested in the study and its findings; 39 BIT faculty were teaching distance online courses in Fall 2006, with 25 students per class. As a result, the population of online learners, teachers, designers, and support staff was large enough to obtain the number of participants needed. The dean of the division approved the inclusion of the students, faculty, and staff in the study. In addition, the advisory committee members from the institution, faculty, and students were interested in helping with this study.

<div align="center">Procedure of the Current Study</div>

This present study's data were collected at the same site in four phases. Phase I was an appreciative inquiry advisory group session. The group was composed of the distance learning director, faculty, an achievement coach from the Health Wellness and Safety Division, and a student. The members of the advisory group learned about the study's purpose and methods and made recommendations about the language for the

appreciative inquiry sessions and the data collection process.  The advisory group was used for member checking in the final analysis phases. Five faculty chose to participate.

Phase II was an invitation stage to online BIT faculty to invite their students to participate and/or for their participation in the inquiry.  A letter of invitation was emailed to all 39 BIT faculty, asking them to participate either by inviting their students or by participating themselves.

During Phase III, students in 5 BIT online courses were invited by the 5-volunteering faculty to participate in 2 one-on-one interviews, or online threaded discussion interviews.  Faculty were asked to set up an appointment for a one-on-one AI interview on student learning persistence and success. Their interviews were conducted face-to-face.

In Phase IV, a total of 30 students – 5 more than the 25 proposed -- voluntarily participated in 2 one-on-one interviews (which the researcher and students set up), or a threaded discussion included on the course discussion board, using the appreciative inquiry questions. The topic of the inquiry was persistence in online courses.  The first interview was conducted the first 6 to 8 weeks into the term, and the second interview was conducted at the end of the term. Conducting the interviews at two different points in time provided data on how the image of success influenced learner persistence and what students valued in themselves as learners.  The first interview was designed to bring out the uniqueness that emerged from the data.

*Data Collection Instruments and Modification*

An interview guide was used as the primary data collection tool during the Discovery phase of the Appreciative Inquiry. Interview questions were based on the

affirmative topic choice, which was learning persistence in online courses. These questions were open-ended and designed to elicit rich storytelling from the interviewee. Grounded theory research calls for open coding where the researcher forms initial categories of information about the topic being studies by segmenting the data before completing all the interviews (Creswell, J. 1998, p57.)  The researcher, after conducting a few of the first round of interviews and transcribing the data, began to use open coding to dimentionalize the categories, which lead to a constant comparative analysis of the findings. Consequently, after using open coding analysis, the researcher found that opposing types of responses emerged and new directions were identified.  The researcher modified the interview questions in order to look more deeply into the properties and subcategories. The questions were revised to gain more detailed information of the student's perceptions of their family's reaction to their taking online courses, the students' images of themselves as they engaged in the online class activities and how they knew that the teacher cared about them. As a result of the need for a change in the students' first and second interview questions, a request for a modification of the question was submitted and accepted by the IRB for protocol 27163. A copy of the approved modification is in the appendix.

*Student Participant First Interview Modified and Original Questions*

The study's modified student interview guide included the following questions:

1. What attracted you to distance learning courses?

2. What does your family think of your taking online courses?

3. How many distance learning courses have you taken?

4. What were your expectations for your first online class?

5. What did you know about distance learning courses when you began?

6. How did you learn about online classes? What kind of information did you find helpful about distance learning classes

7. What is it like when you decide to "go to the online class" or work on the class? How do you describe what you are doing? Where are you?

8. Have you taken a course that is part online and part f2f? How did you like it? What do you think of online only courses?

9. How do you know if a teacher "cares" about you in an online class? Does that make a difference and if so how?

10. How often does your online teacher interact with your or others in the course? How does that affect you?

11. Was there time when you were afraid you would not complete or be successful and yet you found that you were successful in an online class? Tell me about it.

12. What is your age?

13. What is your major course of study?

14. What is your gender: Male___ Female___

The study's original first student interview guide included the following questions:

1. What attracted you to Distance Learning (DL) courses?

2. How many DL courses have you taken?

3. Tell me about a time where you were most persistent in a class or another learning experience.

4. Tell me about a time when you discovered that you could learn something challenging online?

5. What about your learning style helps you to be successful in online courses?

6. What is an example of a time in an online setting when you knew you were more successful than you thought that you ever could be?

7. What do you value about yourself as an online learner?

8. Pretend it is the last day of class and you were able to build on your past learning successes and experiences overcoming obstacles as a learner in and outside of an online environment. Describe what your success and persistence in this course would look like; for example what grade would you receive and would you successfully complete the class?

9. What is your age?

10. What is your major course of study?

11. What is your gender: Male__ Female__

Based on the open coding analysis results from the first interview, the proposed second interview questions were revised to be clearer, to allow for more depth and detailed stories and to encourage more open and honest responses. As a result of the number of comments from the first interview, focused determination was a topic that emerged from the data and needed more clarification. The modified second interview questions were included in the IRB modification described earlier.

*Student Participant Second Interview Modified and Original Questions*

The study's modified student interview guide included the following questions:

1. Can you tell me about a time when you knew you had really learned something in an online class?

    i. What happened? How do you define learning?

    ii. If no, what is that like for you? How do you define learning?

2. Can you tell me about at time when you were really successful in an online class?

    i. What happened? How do you define success?

    ii. If no, what is that like? How do you define success?

3. Over the time of taking this course, was there a high point story?  A time when you were most engaged in the online course, the faculty, and or fellow students. What caused you to reach your highest engagement in an online course?

    i. Tell me about it.

    ii. If no, what is it like not having engaging learning experiences? How does it affect you?

4. Can you tell me a story about the best online teachers you've had. What made them great? What did they do to be the best for you and others? If no, what would make the best online teacher for you?

5. Was there a time when you became aware of the need for you to take responsibility for your online learning and you did so?

    i. If so, what was the situation? What helped you to be responsible for your online learning? How did you learn what to do to be successful? What was the impact for you and the course?

ii.   If no, what is it like when you don't take responsibility for your online learning?

6.  Can you tell me about a time when your background or situation positively affected you as a student?

i.    What do you value about your background or situation that positively affects you as a student?  How has your background and upbringing influenced your success in online courses?

ii.   If no, how does that affect you? How do you overcome it? Were you ever embarrassed in an online course?

7.  If I were to talk to others about your ability as an online student, what do you think they would say about you? Which characteristics of yours help you to be successful in online classes?  Please share examples if you have any.

8.  Do you have focused determination?

i.    If yes, tell me about a time when your focused determination helped you to persist to achieve your online course goal. Where does you determination come from? What keeps you hanging in when you need to? What is persistence to you?

ii.   If no, tell me what it is like to not have focus and or determination?  How does it affect you? What is persistence to you?

9.  More people are taking online courses all the time. If you were on an advisory committee on distance education what three recommendations would you

make to improve online student learning? What are your ideas for faculty, the online courses, and the institution?

10. Imagine you have graduated and your kids or grandkids are taking online courses at CNM. What advice would you have for them? What would your world be like? What would CNM be like?

The study's original second student interview guide included the following questions:

1. Tell me about a time when you were fully engaged in your online course. What engages you in online courses?

2. Tell me about a time when you were successful in an online class. What about you as a student made a difference in your success?

3. Tell me about the changes in your learning, persistence, or success level in this class since our first interview. Has anything changed about you and how you learn online; the class; the instructor; or the other students?

4. Imagine that two years have passed and all students and teachers have regularly used all of the best practices for online learning. What would it be like for you to take and online course:

5. What advise would you give to another student about online course success?

6. What recommendations would you make to help online learners to persist and to be successful?

The final open-ended modified questions number 9 and 10 were used to solicit the dream information. Appreciative inquiry interview guides helped to keep the discussion focused and to elicit stories that students are passionate about. Not all questions were asked, but the intent was to have a question about the course, the student, and the

student's values. The inquiry ended with a vision of a possible positive future of passing their class with an A letter grade.

Students were informed that their grade or status in class would not be affected by their participation or responses and that the information would be kept confidential, to be used only for research purposes. Students and faculty were told that all participant answers were kept confidential, and the consent from was reviewed and signed.

My goal was to have a conversation with students about how they thrive in online classes. At the end of the term students were asked to tell stories about their best learning experiences, a time when they persisted and succeeded what they value about themselves as online learners, and what it would be like if online courses were always like this. I took notes and record the conversations for analysis.

The 30 student individual face-to-face and telephone interviews, and threaded online discussions used the same general open-ended questions. Only 3 of the 30 participants did not complete both interviews. All 30 completed the first interview. Six of the interviewees preferred face-to-face interviews. The face-to-face interviews had much longer stories and the content was less direct than the online responses. Though there was much conversation and dialog flow, when the face-to-face participants were unsure of the question or their answer they talked around in circles. The online students succinctly shared their intimate thoughts and feelings with statements that were very moving. They had stories to tell which were very powerful. Chapter IV has quotes and stories that for the most part were from the online student respondents. Two of the younger student interviewees preferred phone interviews. The telephone seemed to limit

their conversation and the quality of the responses. They appeared to be most distracted and lacked focus.

*Faculty Interviews*

The five faculty who volunteered to be interviewed were asked open-ended questions about best practices, times they saw students engaged in learning, and their vision for online courses and students.  I engaged in face-to-face interviews in a conversation type format about the topics. I took notes during the interview and recorded the conversations. The following is a list of the faculty interview questions.

*Faculty Interview Questions*

The faculty interview guide included the following Statement of Purpose and interview questions:

The purpose of this study was to discover what is best of the best practices of persistence and success in online courses.

1. What was the most remarkable experience of online learning?

2. What was the most enjoyable, satisfying online course experience? What made it satisfying?

3. When do you feel most engaged in an online course?

4. Remember a student or students that was/were successful and persistent in your online class.  Tell me about it.

5. What do you think the student(s) would say was the most enjoyable, satisfying online course experience?

6. When did students seem most engaged in your online course?

7. What do you value about yourself as an online instructor? What would others say about you at your best as an online instructor?

8. What excites you and students about online learning?

## Participants

I used a convenience sample of online students, and faculty, who self-selected to be in the study. Students in the five online classes were invited to participate, but only those who volunteered were selected as participants. Therefore, the convenience sample included all those who volunteered and signed the participation agreement. There were four students who asked to participate but then they did not choose to take the steps of signing the participant consent form and or answering the questions.

Creswell (1998) says that when the investigator is using grounded theory analysis, he or she should use theoretical sampling. A theoretical sample is used so that participants are selected for their ability to contribute to an evolving theory. This begins with studying a homogeneous sample of individuals then after developing the theory studying a heterogeneous group that can contribute opposing factors. This study's convenience sample studied a homogeneous group of online students in business classes. It was very easy to find faculty to volunteer to participate and their students stepped up and volunteered also. At times the researcher did want to find particular individuals when the topic was around people who are parents or older but my convenience sample actually produced enough people with opposing points of view that I was able to do the constant comparative analysis. The results of which provided the answers to Research Question 2. The student participant group had built in diversity by age and life situation, which influenced the variety of responses.

The demographic data on gender and age was collected in the first interview. The life situation data came out of the responses and stories of the participants.  The following describes the demographics of the participants.

*Demographic Data of Student Participants*

| Gender | Number of Participants |
| --- | --- |
| Males | 7 |
| Females | 23 |

| Age Group | Age Range | Number of Participants |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Older | 37-60 years | 14 |
| Average | 27-36 years | 4 |
| Younger | 20-26 years | 12 |

| Personal Life Situation | Number of Participants |
| --- | --- |
| Parents | 11 |
| Foreign | 3 |
| Military | 2 |

The participants self-identified their life situation of parent, foreign, and military resulting in the formation of three different groups that included 11 parents, 3 foreign and 2 military. The other participants did not self-identify into any particular group, even asking a question about how their cultural background positively impacted their learning. There were no first-time online students; most had taken several online courses.

It was important to document the intra-subject changes that occurred as a result of the AI inquiry process. These changes may have happened during the process of conducting the research. While this is not a separate research question, it was important to document the course grades and persistence results of the participants and the non-participants to identify any differences and thereby have a better understanding of AI interviews as an intervention. The information was available through CNM's Banner program.

Out of the population of 81from the Fall 2006 BIT online student pool, 31 student participants provided rich data on persistence and success that was useful for the data analysis. The five faculty persons who taught BIT online courses of Entrepreneurship, Principles of Management, Supervision, Interpersonal Skills and Dreamweaver, in Fall 2006, self-selected to participate in the interview. They offered their students the opportunity to answer the research interview questions and allowed me to post the questions in their discussion boards. I collected data from the discussion board and from the recorded interviews. In addition, I collected the syllabi for each class.

Finally, I included my personal persistence story to show the reader the researcher's assumptions and biases. It was important to document and include the changes that I went through as a researcher while conducting the inquiry.

## Data Analysis

The resulting stories, perceptions, and memo data were analyzed using grounded theory. Creswell's (1998), and Maxwell's (2005) grounded theory analysis coding methods of open coding and constant comparison were used to: 1) develop the themes, and factors, 2) discover new meaning and understanding, 3) to create provocative

proposals and 4) to generate a model. Through the appreciative inquiry data collection and grounded theory analysis, the researcher found the answer to Research Question Four and developed a model of learning persistence and success in online community college courses, called An Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success. As discussed in Chapter I, the researcher used steps from Berg's Stage Model of Qualitative Content Analysis (2001) because the data format lent itself to those steps.

True to grounded theory analysis, the researcher used ongoing memo writing as a reflective tool to gain a better understanding of the codes and themes. The interview notes and interview transcripts were analyzed using open coding during data collection, and as soon as transcriptions were available. The unit of measurement for the codes was a concept, which was counted each time that concept occurred. Through open coding some interview questions were added both set of questions and the Institutional Review Board approved a modification of the questions. The research codes were inductively generated using the grounded theory approach of Glaser (2005). These codes emerged from the participants' stories and dream statements. Following open coding a comparative analysis of the codes was conducted. The comparative analysis results helped the researcher to see the variations in responses by age and life situations and other factors like choice vs. need, and responsibility vs. slacking off which provided the findings for Research Question Two.

In addition to the open coding and constant comparative analysis code lists, matrices on Excel spreadsheets were created to get a better understanding of the differences and similarity of the data. The codes were organized into categories according to the three parts of the construct learning, persistence, and success and later into themes

and factors that related to the concepts that arose from the data.  All interview transcripts, and threaded discussion transcripts and memos were reread specifically for codes that emerged by age and life situation.  Strauss & Corbin (1998) indicate that recoding the developed dimensions or properties of a given theme carries out conceptualization, specification, and dimensionalization, as patterns or themes are identified. The Excel Matrices code list generated the findings for Research Question One.

The raw interview data and memos were put into Atlas.ti software in order to help identify patterns, comparisons, trends, and to easily identify quotes from the stories that supported the themes and factors.  In the final phase of data analysis, I reread each interview with the objective of writing individual vignettes or short interview summaries by age group and personal situation groupings.  These summaries allow me to see threads that ran through the interviews and thereby maintain the context for the quotes, which were lifted from the interviews and used as examples in writing up the research. Compiling and organizing quotes for each code was a method used to identify trends, contrasts, and similarities.  Excel spreadsheets with original codes modified into themes and factors were constructed to check the validity of themes that emerge and to create a provocative proposition from the data as recommended by (Maxwell, 2005).  The advisory committee, faculty, and students, reviewed the model and discussed its implications for development of the themes and provocative propositions.

Finally, the data from both the students and faculty were analyzed to determine whether faculty and student shared similar perceptions of learning persistence and success in online classes and to identify similarities and differences in terminology.

Validation of data was achieved through member checking and as Creswell (1998) recommends by comparing student perceptions, and faculty perceptions as described above. Theoretical validation was achieved through presentation(s) and discussion of emerging conclusions with the advisory committee members, and other online faculty and students. I met with the advisory committee members to share the summarized research results and to discuss the emerging themes, concepts, explanations, and provocative propositions. The member-checking discussion notes were analyzed, and my final review of the data and findings took into account feedback from advisory committee members. The process of discussing my analysis and conclusions with the faculty, students, and staff provided additional validation.

*Validity Issues*

Students sometimes refused to focus on the positive and/or talked about their own agendas. Some students had difficulty identifying their values and talked more about the course or the faculty. I discussed this as a possible issue with the advisory committee members and a University of New Mexico sociology professor to solicit suggestions on ways to better present the interview questions for the second set of questions. Some students wanted to talk about negative experiences and other related topics like family influences on their success. AI's heliotropic principle says that people and, in this case, the students move in the direction of the positive questions. This was important to the paradigm shift. In order accommodate both the need for positive questions and to allow for open responses, the AI questions remained but an opportunity for any other response was provided in the questions. Therefore, the use of AI approach to questions and grounded theory's constant comparison analysis process of question revising, allowed the

students positive and negative ideas to be heard and coded. Chapter Four describes the negative responses in more depth.

The invitation letter, which invited participation by self-selection, clearly defined the process and focus of the interview. Those who did not agree with the method did not participate. All faculty involved may have been biased because of new information and training on student success initiatives ands strategies offered by CNM. At the time of the interviews, the college was focusing on first-time students and retention strategies for orientations. The faculty may have had a more heightened awareness of how to help student succeed than usual. However, these training and information sessions were in the initial stages of development. New concepts and language are being introduced, but it is too soon to see any results in faculty behavior and increases in student success numbers.

*Ethical Issues*

Could my research harm students, faculty, or staff? The students could have been concerned that their grade will be affected by their responses, either positively or negatively. Students received a consent form explaining that the data about their names would not be shared, only the content, and that their responses would be destroyed after the study was completed.

Faculty could have been concerned that their reputation or whether evaluation would be affected by their responses. Again, they all signed an informed consent statement indicating that their names would not be shared, only their responses and background data as approved by UNM IRB # 27163.

Summary

The research process was conducted as planned with one minor modification in questions and an increase in participants from 25 to 30. The appreciative inquiry data collection method was a positive fruitful experience that brought out the emic voices of the students and provided rich, complex data.  The appreciative inquiry's interview question responses regarding their dream or future image of successful online learning in interview one and two took the data to a new level with divergent findings. Modifications in the appreciative inquiry interview questions were made to adapt them to the grounded theory analysis process. Those changes were for the positive and brought out multiple perspective data about the reasons for some younger students' lack of engagement in learning.

The research questions provided a flexible guide for the coding, analysis and findings most of which were either supported by prior research and data or offered new meanings and a model to the body of knowledge in a variety of fields related to persistence in online learning. The resulting data, findings and interpretations can be found in the following Chapters IV and V.

**CHAPTER IV**

**THE FINDINGS**

The 30 students taking part in this study were volunteers from five Fall 2006 online business classes at Central New Mexico Community College: BA 133 Principles of Management, BA 255 Supervision, CIS 272 Dreamweaver, BA 131 Interpersonal Skills, and ENTR 101 Entrepreneurship.  Through the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) interview process, conducted online, face-to-face, and by phone, students shared stories of their online successes, ways they overcame challenges, best faculty practices, and dreams of the best online class experience.  Throughout these interviews, students talked about their success strategies, determination, obstacles, courage, survival, leadership, goals, values, passions, and other human accomplishments.

This chapter describes the categories, themes and factors, understandings and meanings, theory, and provocative proposals that emerge from the appreciative inquiry life stories, the ideas expressed, and other collected data. Determining the relevant themes and concepts in the data were challenging. Frequently, the data collected for this study were highly interrelated.  For instance, when one apparent theme's factor occurred in the data in another theme, it would also be represented by the same data. Physically counting the numbers of times an actor occurred in the data were difficult, because within the same data a thought expressed in an interview question could be the answer to a totally different interview question or even a new concept.

Sometimes when asked if there was anything else they wanted to share or if a question was missing on the topic of appreciative inquiry, the students would share deeper secrets, such as how much their family influenced their persistence and how

grateful they were for the online learning opportunity, no matter what the course was like. One student wanted to be asked, what did his/her family think about him/her taking an online class.

The findings are organized and presented by the research questions. The following questions directed this research study:

- What general themes emerge from an appreciative inquiry of online learning persistence and success with community college online students?

- What understanding or meaning emerges about learning persistence and success in online courses?

- What provocative proposal of learning persistence and success in online courses emerges from the data?

- What theory explains online learning persistence and success?

<div align="center">Participant Description</div>

The participant descriptive data were found to group the participants by age and personal life situations. The participant data were therefore grouped into three age sets: older (36-60), younger (20-26), and middle aged (27-35). These groupings were established somewhat by the participants' self-identification as an older or younger student, by the researcher's collection of age demographics in the first interview and with help from generational researchers (Nickels, W. G., McHugh, J., & McHugh, S., 2004). There were 14 older, 12 younger, and 4 middle-aged students. In addition, the participant's self reported data help to organize them into groups by special personal life situations of parents, foreign and military. The participant break out numbers were 11 parents, 3 foreign students, and 2 military. Not all students identified themselves in any

group but I did collect college age data. The age grouping by life situation break down is show below.

|  | Military ($N$=2) | Foreign ($N$=3) | Parents ($N$=11) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Younger 20-26 ($N$=12) |  |  | 7 |
| Middle 27-35 ($N$=4) |  | 2 | 2 |
| Older 36-60 ($N$=14) | 2 | 1 | 2 |

Challenges in coding the data were sorting students' comments by both generation and life situation. The total number of times that a concept indicated in a comment, is made is shown as ($n$=). The number of participants is indicated by ($N$=). A concept was used as the unit of measure and was counted each time it occurred for each participant. Finally, the break out by sex was 6 males and 24 females.

The text that follows is the detailed set of findings for each research question and a summary of those findings.

Research Question One: What General Themes Emerge from an Appreciative Inquiry of Online Learning Persistence and Success with Community College Online Students?

The findings in response to Research Question One are grouped into three categories and eight themes. The categories and themes are:

Learning Category Themes

- Ways online faculty affect learning persistence and success

- Ways instructional design affects learning persistence and success

- Ways the organizational system affects learning persistence and success

Success Category Themes

- Student behaviors that affect student success

- Personal characteristics that affect student success

Persistence Category Themes

- The expectations and perceptions of online learners toward the online course.

- Goals and motivations that influence online learning persistence and success.

- Values that influence online learning persistence and success.

The findings of the three categories, eight themes, and 36 factors for Research Question One will be displayed in the following 11 tables.

*Learning Category, Theme 1: Ways Online Faculty Affect Learning Persistence and Success*

In order to develop the factors in this theme, it was important to contextualize students' understanding of what learning is as opposed to assuming or imposing a theoretical definition of learning. Therefore, in an attempt to better understand the students' perceptions of learning in an online class, the students were asked in Interview 2 to define learning. As a result, the students defined learning in one of the following three ways:

- Acquiring new knowledge had 32 comments ($n=32$),

- Application of new information or skills had 19 comments ($n=19$),

- Memory had only 7 comments ($n=7$).

More students defined learning as acquiring new knowledge; application took a close second in importance and finally memory. Therefore, for the online community college students' definition of learning is acquiring new knowledge.

The results of this theme are presented in the Table 1, which describes the factors, or ways that faculty behaviors affect how well the student acquires new knowledge.

**Table 1**

*Learning Category, Theme 1, Factors*

| Online learning persistence and success categories/themes for (*N*=30) subjects | Positive response totals | Negative response totals | Total count |
|---|---|---|---|
| Learning Category, Theme 1: Ways online faculty affect learning persistence and success | | | |
| Faculty interaction | (*n*=122) | (*n*=-9) | (*n*=131) |
| Social presence | (*n*=80) | (*n*=-1) | (*n*= 81) |
| Organization/(-onsite) | (*n*=56) | (*n*=-14) | (*n*=70) |
| Flexibility/deadlines | (*n*=44) | | (*n*=44) |
| Accessibility | (*n*=22) | | (*n*=22) |
| Extra credit | (*n*=-9) | | (*n*=9) |

*Note*: A concept was used as the unit of measure and was counted each time it occurred for each participant.

Learning Theme 1 had six factors:  1) faculty interaction, 2) social presence, 3) organization, 4) flexibility and deadlines, 5) accessibility, 6) extra credit.  Table 1 shows that across all of the participant groups, faculty interaction had 122 comments (*n*=122), social presence had 80 comments (*n*=80), and organization had 56 comments (*n*=56). These three were the factors found to have the strongest impact on student learning

persistence and success, according to students' perceptions. Each factor was identified in the students' stories of best practice in online courses.

Interaction with faculty, especially the frequency and timeliness of it was an important factor for all the online students. In fact the interaction factor was slightly over 50% higher than the next most important factor, social presence. Faculty interaction is defined as faculty answering questions and helping with student concerns. Students sometimes called it teacher accessibility. The research findings showed that the best frequency for online faculty interaction was daily. An example from a BA 255 Entrepreneurship class student shows the importance of social presence and how frequent interaction with faculty was mentioned as a best practice.

> #2. I really enjoyed my ENG 100 teacher. She seemed to be online just as much as I was, and I could always depend on the fact that she would answer any of my questions within a 6-8 hour turnaround, and sometimes sooner than that. She was also very nice when she responded to any of my questions, no matter how stupid they were or if she had addressed my issue before with the class. That is what makes her one of my best online teachers.

If students respond so much to faculty interaction as a key factor for learning, then students concern about the amount of interaction could affect their learning negatively as well. These findings imply that interaction and the perception of faculty are closely related. The reason for the high importance for interaction could be that learning is a social process and is enhanced by social presence.

Social presence the second factor's responses were more "social" in nature. The students discussed getting to know their teacher in the late morning hours by having a

synchronous conversation about life styles or being able to ask questions about school,

work, and family, in addition to course content. Social presence theory is generally

defined as awareness of others as real people although they are at a distance

(Gunawardena, 1995). The students' portrayals of real students and teachers are found in

the research data from the individuals' stories. This research shows that the social aspect

of the class is very important in student-to-student, and student-to-faculty, interaction,

and is not just conversation about the course content.  According to the findings, social

presence as a best practice occurs when open access to communication -- through

discussion boards, groups, café's, and email with other students on a variety of topics -- is

built into the course.  When students were asked how they knew when a faculty person

cared about them, their answers focused not just on timely and frequent responses to their

questions and positive, encouraging comments, but also on the faculty person's personal

interest in the student.  For example, consider the response by Business Administration

(BA 133) Principles of Management student #5 to the question, What engages you in

learning in the online class?

> #5. I have definitely felt engaged in this class. The discussion board has been
>
> great and the group projects have worked out well. I think the teacher has kept the
>
> discussion board alive with great questions that require thought, not just book
>
> knowledge. During a recent family emergency, I received a lot of support from
>
> several classmates and from the teacher as well. It helps you realize that you are
>
> not alone in all of this.

The third factor was organization.  An instructor's organization involves timely

grading and feedback, knowing the students' activities in the class – such as on the

discussion board or on group projects – and offering flexibility of deadlines (n=44). The

above quote is also an example of how the use of the discussion board as a course feature

helps learning. The discussion board will be discussed later on in this chapter.

Organization is the glue that holds the student-to-content interaction together. Garrison

and Baynton (1987) refer to organization as dialog and structure in terms of transactional

distance theory. Students felt more engaged and successful when the faculty persons were

more organized and behaved consistently toward the class's inquiries.  Instructional

design drives faculty organization, but students talk about faculty organization and

instructional design in different ways. One student was really annoyed that the date of a

test was not changed in WebCT from the preceding term; as a result, he missed the test. It

is the faculty's responsibility to check their course out before it is posted. The

instructional design was well organized, but human error in not changing a date caused a

student to be annoyed.  Faculty reported that this is a problem with WebCT when it does

not update the calendar for the new semester.  Faculty need to be aware of this feature in

the WebCt Learning Management System. Students also miss assignments for personal

reasons, and faculty flexibility in giving extended deadlines or extra credit (n=9) was

mentioned as a best practice. Student #9 in BA 255 Entrepreneurship class made this

comment about faculty consistency and organization:

> #9. Consistency of assignment turn-in... Some instructors used a drop-box, some
>
> in the discussion posting; one used blogs, some by 0800, some by 2400.  I think
>
> all assignments turn-in should be in an assignment drop-box with a due date at
>
> midnight.  Setting a time in the mid-morning makes no sense for an online class.

Having assignments turned in to different places all over the course menu and Internet didn't make sense either.

Organized faculty will provide some extra credit activities in addition to the course expectations, if they are paying attention to students' persistence and success needs. Here is what a student in Computer Information Systems 272 Dreamweaver class said:

#34. Well extra credit. Extra credit helps, too -- teachers that offer that -- because you know exactly when you miss assignments. Sometimes it really can't be helped and extra credit is a good way. The teachers that offer that I really, really like too, especially in a full semester you just can't. Too much going on in life to handle and the extra credit's a good way to make it up to kind of show them that you care about the assignment and the class and your school, but this happened or that happened. With people all kinds of things happen.

This study's grounded theory constant comparative analysis required taking a close look at these negative responses identified in the tables as -#. The negative responses were identified when the stories about faculty interaction, social presence, or organization had a negative impact on student success. The students showed their negative reactions at the same time that they described how they overcame their difficulties. The factors identified as negative factors are obviously important topics when students are successful, as well as noticeably detrimental when they are absent. The negative comments about faculty interaction surfaced when the faculty did not get back to students online or face-to-face for up to a week. Students turned to the other students; sometimes that solved their problem, while at other times it created more issues. In cases

where online conversations with peers made students feel embarrassed or confused, this accounted for a negative experience with social presence. Younger students expected the faculty to be available and viewed availability as critical to their success. When they did not perceive faculty availability it was a negative comment. Additional information on how faculty interaction is considered from a multigenerational and situational perspective will be shared in the findings for Research Question Two.

The students described their frustration and poor performance when the course materials or the syllabus were poorly organized. The faculty's organization of the course contributed more negatively to student learning persistence and success than any other learning category factor, but it was only at the third level of importance as a positive influence. This paper posits that this shows that students come to online courses expecting to have the information clearly laid out for them.

*Summary of Learning Category, Theme 1: Ways Online Faculty Affect Learning Persistence and Success*

In the Learning Category, the ways online faculty affect the learning persistence and success theme are defined primarily by three factors: faculty interaction, social presence, and organization. When implemented with the intention of fostering student success as described previously, these factors have been shown to positively influence learning persistence and success; and when omitted or implemented negatively, these factors have been shown to have a negative effect on learning persistence and success. The findings for the next theme, ways instructional design affects student learning persistence and success, show some new and some similar factors and their properties.

*Learning Category, Theme 2: Ways Instructional Design Affects Learning Persistence*

*and Success*

Theme 2 has seven factors: 1) organization, 2) discussion board, 3) team activities, 4) communication tools, 5) technology, 6) support and 7) testing on-site. Results of this theme are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

***Learning Category, Theme 2, Factors***

| Online learning persistence and success categories/themes for (*N*=30) students | Positive response totals | Negative response totals | Total count |
|---|---|---|---|
| Learning Category, Theme 2: Ways instructional design affects online learning persistence and success | | | |
| Organization | (*n*=48) | | (*n*=48) |
| Discussion board | (*n*=28) | | (*n*=28) |
| Team activities | (*n*=5) | (*n*= -21) | (*n*=26) |
| Communication tools | (*n*=14) | | (*n*=14) |
| Technology | (*n*=12) | (*n*=-2) | (*n*=14) |
| Support | (*n*=3) | (*n*=-3) | (*n*=6) |
| Testing onsite | | (*n*=-4) | (*n*=4) |

In this study, instructional design refers to the learning methods, activities and strategies identified in the course outline and syllabus and include the requirements for students' successful completion of the course. The syllabi for the five courses the

students in this study were taking are included in the appendices. What defines the

instructional organization factor is both how clear and flexible the directions are and how

reasonable the expectations but also the following sub factors:

    a.  Team activities

    b.  Discussion board

    c.  Communication tools

    d.  Technology

    e.  Testing onsite

    f.  Support

Organization with 48 comments ($n$=48) was the most important factor for student

learning persistence and success. Deadlines, test lengths, and quizzes were frequently

mentioned as success challenges. The following is an example of what a student

interviewee said:

> #15. Timelines are very good; not just for team projects but if you have four
>
> courses and the work is all due generally on Mondays or Tuesdays for distance
>
> learning courses.
>
> #9 Assignments should have formatted examples for reference. This would make
>
> it easier for instructors to grade as well as not waste student time redoing work.
>
> #9 Continued. What would make this course better? Answer: A clear format for
>
> all online instructors to post information, instructions, and resources. I'm taking
>
> four online courses and each instructor does thing differently and puts things in
>
> different places. For instance: One instructor may post an assignment and due

date in a discussion, while others have a specific "Assignments" section.

Basically, I feel that all WebCT courses should have a standard format.

#3 I think I had a good instructor the first class. It was really clear and organized.

So that was so helpful. She's really good.

#34 Question: What recommendations do you have to improve online courses?

Answer: The biggest one would probably be doing things a little more uniform.

Not entirely so, because I know a lot of teachers have their different teaching

styles, but maybe as a requirement. Some teachers that I have use Passport, and

then some use Web CT e-mail and that gets kind of confusing, especially if you're

taking a lot of distance learning courses. You can't remember which teacher uses

which form of communication. Some don't use it at all and they just use

discussion boards where you post questions, things like that. That's a big one. If

you knew like in every web page that regardless of what else there was there

would be a link for the home page, the syllabus, the assignment schedule and

maybe e-mail, that would be really helpful because some of them post it on a

calendar.

The next quote combines the desire for organization with faculty interaction. This

shows that students are looking for both factors simultaneously.

#16 My Business Writing instructor really gave detailed explanations and

feedback on homework. She answered emails promptly

Instructional design was talked about as a critical feature in the learning theme. It

is the glue that holds the course content together and strategically guides the student

toward their online learning. Students are quick to acknowledge when the course organization helps or hinders their learning.

The team activities factor identified 5 comments, which were positive, and 21, which were negative (n=5, n=-21). Team or group activities were required in most of the classes, with varying success; they will be described later as a negative activity for students.  There were only five positive comments about team activities and it was hard to separate what specifically they liked because it was mixed with the some negative comments.  The following two quotes are examples of comments about how teams help with learning engagement but are riddled with problems.

#7 I was really challenged with BA 113.  It required a team project that was hard because of other team members.

#8 In the first group project we had there were seven team members and only three of them, including myself were participating. I enjoyed my conversations with my two active team members but I was extremely disappointed that the other four team members didn't seem to care enough to join in. It affected me in a negative way. I couldn't believe that people that are doing the exact same thing I am couldn't have the decency to step up to their responsibilities as a team member. I now have another team project to work on and I'm not very excited about it. This lack of experience has made me feel insecure about teaming up with anyone in a dl class.

The next quote is an example of a positive team experience around organizing roles.  Most respondents were stuck at this task.  They did not know what was needed to do the activity or what skills they could contribute.  An older student took a risk and

offered to complete a task, which caused the others to follow suite. Interviewee #2 tried

to help get the group organized but she failed according to her.

> *#2 Respondent:*    No one assigned the different roles. That's what I'm saying. It
>
>     was real interesting to watch how those roles evolved.
>
> *Interviewer:*    People just chose their roles?
>
> *Respondent:*    Right. When he did the outline, he said, "If it's OK with
>
>     everyone else, I'll volunteer to do the introduction." I then
>
>     wrote an e-mail back, feeling pretty sheepish, because I reacted
>
>     to my frustrations, I wrote the e-mail back saying, "That
>
>     sounds great. I'll do a conclusion." Then the other person
>
>     said, "I have a friend or somebody-I don't know how she said
>
>     it-I know someone who's very good at proofreading. I'll
>
>     volunteer with their help to do the proofreading." It was
>
>     perfect. That made a really good point.

Clearly team and group activities are a factor that needs some more research. The

international distance learning community uses e-mentors to help resolve these problems

but CNM and other US universities usually just rely on the teacher to watch each group

closely. The US students are frustrated, and the faculty are drawn often just stop asking

for team projects to alleviate the problem. However, this curtails a learning strategies

they offers student-to-student interaction, which is important for learning.

The discussion board with its 28 positive comments (n=28) was identified as the

second most positive feature influencing students' learning persistence and success. The

discussion board was the place where student-to-student interaction was seen as valuable

because it was the place of hope for students who were lost. Numerous quotes identified the use of the discussion board as a best practice. The earlier quote #5 on learning engagement also is an example of the discussion board factor as well. The reader may refer to the earlier quote under learning engagement. The next quote shows how the discussion board helps to facilitate team interaction. In this case it was a positive team comment.

> #34 Well just jumping on the discussion board to talk about it with my team I was a week late doing that. They were okay with it because I ended up really involved after that. I was the one that put our slide show together, which was like 30-something slides for our Business class. Everybody did the research, and I put it all together to kind of make it up to them because I had been a week late getting on there. I really like distance learning working with teams - well most of the time. I suppose it would depend on the team, but I had I guess just good experiences with all of the teams I've worked with. Everybody's real supportive and they check the messages every day or every other day to let me know what's going on.

> #11 Interviewer: How do you like the discussion board? Answer: I like it unless I have to reply to others. Like if she's replying to mine that's fine but if I have to reply to others I don't like it.

> #22 I didn't know what to do, so I go to the discussion board to kind of see where everyone else is, and I'm still trying to find myself so to speak, but I think I've got it down now, so for the rest of this semester things should be smooth.

The discussion board is different from other communication tools like email in WebCT or outside; these tools were also helpful, as identified by their count of 14 comments (*n*=14).

Technology with its 14 comments (*n*=14), is a feature embedded in the course through tools such as PowerPoint, videos, and a streamed lesson, was an additional learning enhancer and best practice.  The following quote regarding technology is from a BA 131 Interpersonal Skills class student:

> # 7 The PowerPoint and online help with the text and CD help me understand and learn the concepts of what is being taught.

> A BA 133 Supervision student confirms how additional technology helped her:

> #15 I really didn't think I was going to be able to learn how to read financial statements online. We started with the basics and she added in things that were more difficult as we went along. One thing that really helped was the media player. When I watched them, it was like I was in class but I could rewind or replay what the teacher was saying until I got it. By the end of the class I could understand and prepare those statements.

When the technology became too complicated to download or access, it was counted as a negative unit of measure.

Finally, support, refers to the available online links and resources embedded in the course to help manage the WebPages and the content. Support in this study does not mean personal or academic assistance from a person but rather a more resource or technical feature that is available for additional time on task or clarification. It was especially important for disabled or special needs students and highly independent

learners.  The support factor had mixed reviews from the students, though it is better to

err on the side of more support offerings rather than less.  It was surprising that this topic

seldom came up in students' success stories. Older students thought it was up to them to

solve their own problems and did not even ask the faculty for help, let alone ask for any

outside resources.  However, some independent learners rely on extra resources to find

the answer himself or herself, as indicated by the CIS 272 Dreamweaver student below.

An example of the way participants talk about their love of independent learning is

below:

> # 34. It seems like it is up to me in the online classes to discover for myself and
> learn what I can. I like that. I like to put myself up to the challenge and learn what
> I can. I think that software classes really accomplish this hands-on type of
> learning for me. I get to teach myself what the software can do by diving in
> headfirst.
>
> #33 Question: What helps you to persist?
>
> Answer:
>
> 1. Online outlines and resources: FAQs, assignment sheets, instructions
>
> 2. Chat sessions are not a good idea, use the discussion board
>
> 3. Online tutoring
>
> #16 But then after reading the chapters and stuff I just got ideas and stuff on how
> to do it. That was my biggest fear, is that I wouldn't have like the visual stuff that
> you get during the class and sometimes that was what I was afraid of, but she had
> great PowerPoints and just the explanations and stuff that she would give.

It is surprising that the online students had so few comments about support in any of their responses. From the researchers experience, when students discuss success factors in their face-to-face classes, they often have much to say about the availability and usefulness of tutors or study guides.

The research findings regarding the structure of the course included negative comments and, therefore, negative units. There were many negative comments about being required to come onsite for testing ($n = -4$) or orientations. Students wanted faculty to know that the reason they took a distance learning class was because they did not or could not come on campus. They could not understand why faculty would require them to be onsite for any activities. Some older students complained about getting lost finding the testing room and sometimes missing their exam. The team activities had 21 comments ($n = -21$) was one of the most negative course activities. The students struggled with communicating online. Trying to organize themselves and the others to communicate and organize into a team required them to work at a synthesis level, causing some of the students to be very frustrated, embarrassed, and angry at the assignment. This is what an Entrepreneurship student said about team activities:

> #9. Team assignments should either be done away with or at least have clear lines
> of responsibility assigned and monitored, with repercussions. The online course
> does not have a set day and time for everyone to get together in a group. Trying
> to coordinate schedules is ineffective. The whole purpose of asynchronous – not
> to meet face to face but they were preferred meeting face to face for group work.

There is a need for support such as live online coaching/mentoring or more training on teamwork skills before requiring the teamwork activity. Some students finally

learned, through trial and error, how to work online in teams and very proudly claim that

as a major achievement. Here is an example from another Entrepreneurship course

student:

> #9. It was the third time a team assignment was made.  My first online team
>
> experiences were a fiasco.  I was determined that the next team assignment was
>
> going to go more smoothly and I stepped in and got things going and stayed
>
> engaged.
>
> I think the latest team assignment, half of them would say I'm an asshole,
>
> but it's coming down to the wire and those that have not helped I've chastised.
>
> The other team members that have helped feel the same way, but would never
>
> spank other team members.

These findings indicate that faculty should be cautious about assigning team activities

without proper student support. Clear guidelines and faculty or mentor support during

ongoing team activities is very important to the team or group activity.  More attention to

team activities could positively impact student learning persistence and success.

*Summary of Learning Category, Theme 2: Ways Instructional Design Affects Learning*

*Persistence and Success*

This study's findings show that the organization and structure of the online course

need to be examined in terms of the course requirements for team activities, discussion

board, communication tools, technology, testing onsite, and support.  A constant

comparative analysis of the instructional organization theme shows that the same factors,

if handled improperly, can result in negative learning persistence and success

consequences.

The last set of findings on the learning category involves the theme of ways

organizational systems affect learning persistence and success.

*Learning Category, Theme 3: Ways the Organizational System Affects Learning*

*Persistence and Success*

Theme 3 has three factors: 1) availability of DL classes, 2) lower or no costs, 3)

more courses and more teachers. The responses for this theme are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Learning Category, Theme 3, Factors*

| Online Learning Persistence and Success categories/ themes for *N*=30 | Positive response totals | Negative response totals | Total count |
|---|---|---|---|
| Learning Category, Theme 3: Ways the Organizational System Affects Learning Persistence and Success | | | |
| Availability of DL/options w/dl | (*n*=13) | | (*n*=13) |
| Lower/no costs | (*n*=9) | | (*n*=9) |
| More courses and teachers | (*n*=2) | | (*n*=2) |

The findings concerning this theme show that students want to have distance

learning as an option.  They have positive feelings about the availability of online

courses, which had 13 comments (*n*=13).  Learning persistence and success are positively

affected by an educational system that offers distance learning. In addition, some students

wanted even more course offerings and teachers (*n*=2).  There were students who

strongly felt that the course costs should be lowered or courses should be free. The quote below begins to show why students believe the costs should be lowered.

> #7 You did not address being totally a DL course. The books could be cheaper and not hinder the ability for someone with limited funds to struggle to purchase the books. Distance learning should be affordable for everyone to participate in. Also, the online distance learning cost should be abolished since online is a solution to the limited parking and space required to teach a course. I would make the courses more affordable. Taking distance-learning courses is expensive if you take several courses. Multiply the 90 fee for 4-5 courses and OUCH, because you still have to contend with the purchase of the school books and registration for the course. It would be nice if the books were PDF format and part of the course or fees assessed.

> #3 I think there's a lot of people that don't realize that the online classes are really there. Really nice to take, because it allows you to be flexible in your time. Not everybody says that oh, they can't take it, because it's not a good time to take it. I think people are um, stay away from it, because the costs are usually more, than the online classes. Other students just wanted to have more courses to be available.

> #8 My suggestions to improve online learning:

> - -More classes available

> - -Newer programs and books to accompany the classes

> - -More teacher and student interaction

You have not asked how the students pay for the distance learning. There are

additional fees per credit hour for the distance learning classes which are an added

expense for students. As we all know students are poor enough as it is, thirty

dollars per credit hour extra can really add up.

*Summary of Learning Category, Theme 3: Ways the Organizational System Affects*

*Learning Persistence and Success*

Although students did not exhibit as much interest in this topic, it is important to

describe the findings regarding all the stakeholders so that management is more

knowledge about online student perceptions of online courses. In addition, decision

makers will again learn that students desire accessible learning options to fit their

situation. They want distance learning to continue to be offered and to have additional

distance-learning course possibilities. It would be helpful periodically to look at the costs

and affordability of distance learning for the population, or at least offer an explanation

of costs to the online students.

*Success Category, Theme 1: Student Behaviors that Affect Student Success*

When students were asked for a definition of success, they defined success in

online courses as improving their knowledge with 18 comments ($n=18$) and passing the

class with 9 comments ($n=9$). The students gave two definitions, depending on their

interests and needs. The Success Theme has seven factors: 1) Effort, 2) Organization, 3)

Student-student interaction, 4) Focus on course, 5) Course selection for risk aversion, 6)

Creating contextual image of online learning and 7) Creating contextual image of online

learning. The results of the Success Category and Theme 1 are described in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Success Category, Theme 1, Factors*

| Online learning persistence and success categories/themes for (*N*=30) students | Positive response totals | Negative response totals | Total count |
|---|---|---|---|
| Success Category Theme 1: Student behaviors that affect student success | | | |
| Effort | (*n*=148) | (*n*=-5) | (*n*=153) |
| Organization | (*n*=137) | (*n*=-5) | (*n*=142) |
| Student-student interaction | (*n*=66) | (*n*=-2) | (*n*=68) |
| Focus on course | (*n*=24) | (*n*=-5) | (*n*=29) |
| Course selection for risk aversion | (*n*=11) | | (*n*=11) |
| Creating contextual image of online learning | (*n*=6) | (*n*=-3) | (*n*=9) |

Table 4 shows that despite the two definitions of success, there are the following seven similar behavioral factors in student success. Effort, organization, student-to-student interaction, overcoming obstacles or resilience, course selection risk aversion (selecting a course where there is the least risk of failure in the online class, like taking a course in something you already know.), creating a contextual image of their online learning class, and securing family support were found to positively affect student success in online classes. These factors are discussed in detail below.

Effort with 148 positive comments and 5 negative comments (*n=148, -5*) –
although it is not really a behavior or characteristic, as it is an indicator of a characteristic
(defined in the dictionary as energy) – was the most frequently discussed factor, both
positive and negative. Putting in the effort was most closely identified with success. The
effort factor for has one of the highest numbers of hits. In order to be successful, students
concur that effort, defined as "the use of physical or mental energy to achieve
something," is essential (Oxford American Dictionary, 1980, p. 275). Effort is needed to
overcome barriers, to complete course requirements, to be organized, to seek support, to
interact with faculty and fellow students, and to complete all the other tasks that students
need to do in order to learn. It is often an overlooked factor but paramount in the minds
of the learners.

When asked, "If you were to get an A in this class, how would that happen?" an
Entrepreneurship student responded:

> #10. It would have happened because I really dedicated myself to getting the work
> done, and I would have really learned it by looking for new ways to learn it. It
> would really make me proud to know that I am truly smart and show me what
> hard work can do for me.

This student described how he would apply his effort and devote that effort to the
special purpose of getting the work done and problem solving. But the student went one
step further by talking about imagining the anticipated results of being smart and having
that hard work/effort pay off. The anticipatory principle of appreciative inquiry is shown
in this quote.

Its opposite arose in the constant comparative analysis as being lazy or "slacking off" (*n*=-5), as the students described it. "Sacking off" is referenced only when students were asked about their expectations of an online class. Students described how they quickly learned that they could not slack off, and that effort was necessary in order to be successful.

A student in BA 133 Principles of Management talked about the effort as forcing herself: "I force myself to be organized. It's not natural." Another student from the same class gives a reason for applying effort as a suggestion to future online learners.

#5. In online classes, you cannot "just get by" without reading the material and going to class and listening to everyone else. You have to do the work and the reading. I would also tell them to be interactive and keep a close watch on the boards and assignments; in other words, log on often.

One of the next most important factors in this researcher's findings is student organization. Students' ability to manage their time and organization show in Table 4 as having 137 positive comments and 5 negative comments (*n*=137,-5) does positively influence success. Students need to be organized in order to meet the rigorous demands of online classes. The temptations to do other things and avoid the course requirements are very alluring. Sometimes it takes only one late assignment or poor grade to undermine success. Students are very busy which is why they selected an online class. In addition, their lack of organization keeps them from understanding the impact of a late assignment or one poor grade on the overall grade. Many times they panic and just drop if they are just a little behind.

The students described how they learned that the key to success in online courses is being organized. Without this skill, students are certain to fail the class.  A  BA 255 Supervision student said it directly:

#34.  I think I have learned many challenging things from online courses.  I have learned the valuable lesson of time management first and foremost.  You have to be organized and able to stay on top of the course work to be able to succeed with distance learning.  As far as one challenging thing that I have had to do for an online course, the hardest has simply making the appropriate time for it.

Another BA 255 Supervision student confirmed these observations with this recommendation for others:

#3. My advice would be to keep on track and don't fall behind in your classes.

Younger students described how they actually develop their organizational skills in online classes. In contract, the older student's greatest strength is their level of organization and responsibility. This CIS 272 Dreamweaver student describes how she is trying to be more organized:

#5. I would have to say that I'm good at self-pacing, and knowing when to speed up or take some extra time makes me successful. I might not hit every deadline, but I actually know what the chapters mean. Having time each day or week to devote to the class and work. One day reading the book, one day posting, and one day working on the exercises. If I got an A in this class, I would be more likely to continue to use Dreamweaver and look favorably on WebCT courses.

A few students commented that they were unable to be successful, because of a lack of organizational skills (*n*=-5).  More discussion about student organization can be found in the next chapter.

The next most important success factor is student-to-student interaction (n=66). The students described their positive feelings toward their classmates and teacher resulting from the communication opportunities available in online classes. They enjoyed discussion boards, chats, and emails. Through their interactions, they were socially constructing their learning, which supports Vygotsky, Moore, Saba, Garrison, and other social constructivists' theory, or learning.  When asked what helps her to be successful, a BA 255 Supervision student responded:

> #17. Answering questions like the discussion groups, putting up questions on the discussion board.  It gives you more of an understanding of what you're reading. When you have questions, they answer them…..I just learn from the students as well, especially like the discussions.  I don't have that one-on-one contact with the students to know what do you think about this.  I've never done that like in the discussion posts and stuff, or when they comment on what you've posted and the way they see it and you get a different view of things like, oh, maybe my way of thinking or what I thought isn't always right; just different views from the students and the instructor, because he'll reply to your post on what he thinks.

Through this appreciative inquiry's findings, students are saying that interaction first with faculty and second with other students is a critical factor in their success in an online class.  Classes that do not offer an opportunity to communicate make it more difficult for students to learn and often create obstacles to the students' learning. Two

students commented on how the lack of communication in an online class negatively affects their success. The following quote illustrates this lack of communication:

#5. I have had several instructors that I am sure never read half of the assignments that were sent to them; they do not respond individually. I think really specific instructions are important also, as well as an instructor that will reply to your questions more than 3 days in the week. There are many great DL instructors at CNM, and that is why I keep taking classes here.

Creating a contextual image of online learning (*n*=11) was a serendipitous behavioral success factor that emerged from the data. The students explained that their creation of an mental image of being in a classroom helped them to be more focused and responsible. Creating a contextual image was surprisingly found in the first round of interviews from the parent student group.  The interviewees graphically described how they saw themselves when they were engaged in their online class. One mother said that she told her children that mommy is going in the room with her computer and she would be in class now. They should not bother her. Another mother would signal her husband that it was time to take the children to do something. She described how she created an image of being in a classroom when she was in the discussion board.

This contextual imaging did not occur for all of the students, but it did help some students to be in a "learning frame of mind." A BA 255 Supervision student described it this way:

A. It's a classroom setting to me when I'm sitting in front of that computer. When I go online, it's like if I was at school.  I am at school in class, but that's my time to do my work or to understand what I need to do.

Q: And that's what helps you to be successful. You just treat it as a regular classroom.

A: Yeah, it's real. It's just like being here at campus. I'm determined to try to do my best.

*Success Category, Theme 2: Personal Characteristics That Affect Student Success*

There are two factors in Success Category, Theme 2: 1) independent learner and 2) visual learner. The results of this Success Category, Theme 2 are described in Table 5.

**Table 5**

***Success Category, Theme 2, Factors***

| Online learning persistence and success category, themes for $N$=30 students | Positive Factors | Negative Factors | Total Factors |
|---|---|---|---|
| Success Category, Theme 2: Personal characteristics that affect student success | | | |
| Independent learner | ($n$=18) | | ($n$=18) |
| Visual learner | ($n$=8) | | ($n$=8) |

Table 5 shows that the personal characteristics that students identified as helpful to their success were being an independent learner ($n$=18) and a visual learner ($n$=8). An example of how a student describes her behaviors as a visual learner can be seen in the quotation below.

#34. I'm very visual, and I think that plays a big part in me being successful at distance learning, because in the classroom setting generally the teacher will

lecture and either give you notes or an outline or you can take them yourself most

of the time, and that is really hard for me. It's hard for me to focus on what the

teacher's saying and comprehend that and be writing at the same time and

keeping up writing that quickly and things like that. I need to have it right in front

of me, so online learning I think is really good because when they have

instructions or whatever on how to do something it's all laid out for you online

and you can go back and refer to it whenever you need to if you're unclear about

something.

Very few students could identify their learning style, but those who did clearly

explained one or both of these characteristics. It is worth noting that there was high

energy in their stories about being successful as an independent and/or visual learner.

The quote above was shared in an animated positive manner that demonstrated the high

energy she had around knowing her learning style and applying it successfully.

*Summary of Success Category*

The success category has two themes: behaviors and personal characteristics. The

behavioral theme has seven factors: organization, student-to-student interaction,

overcoming obstacles or resilience, risk aversion/course selection, creating a contextual

image of their online learning class, securing family support, and effort. The personal

characteristics theme has only two factors: being an independent learner and a visual

learner. When students perform as needed in the course and are persistent, success is

possible. It is difficult to separate the success themes and factors from the persistence

themes and factors because they are not mutually exclusive. Three factors –

determination, responsibility, and effort – could be reported under both the success and

persistence categories. This researcher chose to identify effort in both tables but to explain these three factors in the persistence category because they are defining subjective factors for the participants.

*Persistence Category, Theme 1: The Expectations and Perceptions of Online Learners Toward the Online Course*

The primary way students defined persistence was determination, or "sticking with it." Determination (*n*=81, -3) with 81 positive comments and 3 negative comments is a thought or cognitive process of intention that precedes decisions and actions. The student's expectations and perception are demonstrated in their intentions. The results of the Persistence Category, Theme 1 are described in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Persistence Category, Theme 1, Factors*

| Online learning persistence and success, categories and themes for *N*=30 | Positive Reponses | Negative Responses | Total Responses |
|---|---|---|---|
| Persistence Category Theme 1: What are the expectations and perceptions of online learners | | | |
| Responsibility | (*n*=102) | (*n*=-5) | (*n*=107) |
| Choice/Convenience | (*n*=31) | | (*n*=31) |
| Timely faculty responses | (*n*=16) | | (*n*=16) |
| Learning | (*n*=15) | | (*n*=15) |
| Overcoming life & personal obstacles (embarrassment, fears, and uncertainties) | (*n*=12) | | (*n*=12) |

Table 6 shows that responsibility is critical to persistence. Responsibility is a positively directed thought that enables students to take responsibility ($n=107$) and to put in the effort necessary to be successful.  Taking responsibility for their learning and their success is a factor that older students understood more easily than younger students because the older students bragged about their commitment to the course and the younger students struggled with the level of responsibility.  The students recognized eventually that they had to be personally responsible. Usually, following submission of a few late assignments that had academic consequences, they realized that they could not slack off or let work slide in an online class.

Choice, flexibility, and convenience with 31 positive comments ($n=31$), was a factor found through constant comparison.  Choice had its opposite default, no other option.  People who said that online learning were their only option and last resort fell into this category. Those students who just liked the flexibility and convenience and had a choice of face-to-face classes or not fell into the choice factor. Often the people who had a choice also make that choice for the sake of lifelong learning, as opposed to getting a degree or credential or other career/job needs.  Both sets of students commented on their desire for flexibility and convenience, so choice has a higher score than default. Further research on this comparison is needed.

Timely faculty responses ($n=16$) were found to be an important expectation for students, especially younger students, who were accustomed to communicating online with their peers.  Older students did not expect faculty interaction and felt they had to be on their own as independent learners. This factor is related to both interaction with faculty as a learning factor and interaction with students as a success factor.

Learning (*n*=15) was another expectation students mentioned. Although this is a

reasonable expectation, it did not receive as high a score as other persistence factors.

Overcoming obstacles (*n*=12) or resilience is another behavioral factor. Students

from both the older and parent groups talked about the ways in which they were resilient,

or able to bounce back when they encountered obstacles to completing the course

successfully.  The ability to deal with obstacles and overcome them – whether the

obstacles are personal or academic – is a critical success skill. This BA 133 Principles of

Management student talks about the personal obstacles she faces and how she is

overcoming them:

> #6. I have been extremely ill these past few years and am slowly getting better,
>
> but then sometimes I have a relapse and feel as if I am back at the bottom of the
>
> ladder. Determination and persistence come from what was taught up to
>
> approximately age 7 by whoever happened to be in the teaching state when a
>
> lesson was needed.

Risk aversion with 11 negative responses (*n*=11) is another behavioral success

factor that was especially found in the older group.  Older students described taking

courses in subjects that they already knew a great deal about so that they could be

successful in the class.  They lowered their fear level by increasing their comfort level

with the content. Learning at a distance is risky.  These students proudly described their

online class success more in terms of mastering the medium than in learning new

knowledge. An older and disabled CIS 272 Dreamweaver student talked this way about

his decision to take a course he already knew:

# 28. A lot of the classes I took were subjects I was already familiar with. I'd already taken at least Adobe Illustrator, which was the first class I took here online. I'd done Adobe Illustrator for quite a while before that. So it seemed like most of it was stuff I already knew. I don't know if I were starting from scratch if it would be different.

*Summary for Persistence Category Theme 1: The Expectations and Perceptions of Online Learners toward the Online Course*

The key factors for Theme 2 were responsibility, Choice and timely faculty responses. Expectations and perceptions play a critical role in early drop out or persistence. The more their expectations are confirmed and perceptions clarified the better the learning, persistence and success. The choice factor affects their expectations. If a student has no other choice but to take a distance learning class their main expectation is that they will not have to come on site. If the student has more flexibility in their decision then they maybe more accepting and have less rigid expectations.

*Persistence Category, Theme 2: The Goals and Motivations That Influence Online Learning Persistence and Success*

Persistence Category Theme 2 has the following six factors: 1) Family factor/their children, 2) Educational factors of desire to learn, 3) Degree/high grades, 4) Self esteem, 5), Career development/job, and 6) Balanced worklife/better life. The results of the Persistence Category, Theme 2 are described in Table 7.

**Table 7**

*Persistence Category, Theme 2, Factors*

| Online learning persistence and success, category and theme for *N=30* | Positive Responses | Negative Responses | Total Responses |
|---|---|---|---|
| Persistence Category, Theme 2: The goals and motivations that influence online learning persistence and success | | | |
| Family factor/their children | (*n=48*) | (*n=-1*) | (*n=49*) |
| Educational factors of desire to learn | (*n=18*) | | (*n=18*) |
| Degree/high grades | (*n=18*) | | (*n=18*) |
| Self esteem | (*n=13*) | (*n=-1*) | (*n=14*) |
| Career development/job | (*n=12*) | | (*n=12*) |
| Balanced worklife/better life | (*n=12*) | | (*n=12*) |

The findings for the theme, what goals and motivations influence online learning persistence and success begin with the family factor with 48 positive and 1 negative comment (*n=49*). The motivational factor of wanting a better life for their children, parental pressures or influences, and the need to prove themselves to others (*n=49*) was the highest-ranked factor in this theme. Students described their motivating decision to take online courses as a way to do one or more of the following: to offer more to their children, to fulfill their family's wishes, to improve their family situation, or to prove to others such as their spouse, teachers, or neighbors that they could be successful. Young

and old students alike described their value for family, rather than for self. This is what a BA 131 student said motivated her:

> #9. There are many times that I get frustrated with one thing or another and think of how easy it would be to quit and go back at a more convenient time, but then I look at my baby girl and I know that would disappoint her. It is up to me to give my daughter a good life, and I can't let her down. She is what keeps me going and keeps me in school. Being able to go to school online is awesome because then I can stay home with my daughter; when she sleeps, I go to school. It seems to work out perfectly.

The one negative score was recorded because a participant's family did not support her goals and hindered her motivations. She struggled with the conflict between her responsibilities to her family and her educational desires.

The educational factors of desire to learn ($n=18$) and achieving a degree or high grades ($n=18$) were also powerful motivators. The factors of self-esteem ($n=13$), career development/job ($n=12$,) and balanced school and work ($n=12$), played a motivational role as well. It is impossible to identify one significant goal or motivation of the participants. They are all different, as they come from multiple perspectives related the student's generation and situation. Their goals and motivations are like gases floating in space, wanting to be fulfilled. Like subjective motivations, these gases sometimes connect and sometimes oppose each other. The following quote from a BA 133 Principles of Management student gives a flavor of goals and motivations as a complex phenomenon:

#21. What really drives me to finish school is the thought of a better life and being a positive influence to my family and other teenage/young mothers. My number 1 priority is my husband and children. My parents got divorced when I was younger and they had to really focus on their incomes and finding themselves. I really want to break the mold. When my kids look back, I want them to remember their parents at every bake sale, play, and any event that is important to them. In order to do that, I need a good job where I can possibly set my own hours. And I've come to realize, the only way I can do that is with a good education. We live far away from any college courses, so online classes make it so much easier on our vehicles and gas, but also our family.

*Summary of Persistence Category, Theme 2: The Goals and Motivations That Influence Online Learning Persistence and Success*

The family factor is clearly the most significant finding in this theme, followed by educational factors, self-esteem, career development, and a balanced worklife. As shown previously, it is futile to try and pull from the findings any one determining factor. These subjective motivations intensify and grow in magnitude when fueled by the possible solution of taking online courses to fulfill them.

*Persistence Category, Theme 3: Values That Influence Online Learning Persistence and Success*

Persistence Theme 3 has three factors of: 1) Lifestyle needs and academic achievement, 2) Family and 3) Learning. The results of the Persistence Category, Theme 3 are described in Table 8.

**Table 8**

*Persistence Category, Theme 3, Factors*

| Online learning persistence and success categories/themes for (N=30) students | Positive response totals | Negative response totals | Total count |
|---|---|---|---|
| Persistence Category, Theme 3: Values that influence online learning persistence and success | | | |
| Lifestyle needs and academic achievement | (n=32) | | (*n*=32) |
| Family | (*n*=14) | | (*n*=14) |
| Learning | (*n*=14) | | (*n*=14) |

Table 8 shows the findings for persistence category theme 3, values that influence

online learning persistence and success, were that personal needs and academic

achievement (*n*=32) was the highest factor for students. The students valued both their

lifestyle or personal needs and academic achievement; with online classes, they found

that they could have both. Family values and learning values had the same priority level.

There were no negative values statements. Like motivation factors, value factors are

complex, intertwined subjective phenomena.  Further research is needed here.  The

students described how they were excited at the possibility of matching their values of

family and learning through online courses. The following quote from a BA 255

Entrepreneurial student reflects this excitement:

> #17. I value the fact that I am accomplishing a higher education for myself and
>
> I'm still able to be the type of mother I need to be at the same time.

*Summary of Persistence Category, Theme 3: Values That Influence Online Learning Persistence and Success*

Lifestyle and academic achievement support may be part of the family and learning values identified in the findings. In addition, the data showed that the students' motivations, goals, and values complement each other. These powerful forces drive the determination to succeed and the persistence necessary for online learning success. These persistence factors were so strong that they may have influenced the participating students to take from 2 to 20 online courses. The provocative proposition described in Research Question Three supports the provocative proposal four that the effect of persisting in online classes is transformational. Transformational online learning is a provocative concept that came out of the grounded theory data and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

*Overall Summary, Research Question One: What General Themes Emerge from an Appreciative Inquiry of Online Learning Persistence and Success with Community College Online Students?*

The findings of this research showed through an appreciative inquiry that student effort, organization, student-to-student interaction, taking responsibility for learning, faculty interaction with students, social presence, and course structure had the most positive effect on learning persistence and success for online community college students. The findings from the online student responses for Research Question One are organized into the three categories of learning, persistence, and success and eight themes.

The students defined learning in one of the following three ways (in order of significance): acquiring new knowledge, application of new information or skill, and

memory.  The first theme of the Learning Category was the ways online faculty affect learning persistence and success.  The three primary learning factors for this theme were faculty interaction, social presence, and organization. The second theme of the Learning Category was the ways instructional design affects learning persistence and success. The following eight learning factors came out of the data: clear and flexible directions, reasonable expectations, team activities, discussion board, communication tools, technology, testing onsite, and support.  The final theme for the Learning Category is the ways the organizational system affects learning persistence and success. The research results show the following three learning factors: availability of online courses, lower costs, and more courses and teachers.

Students define the Success Category as improving their knowledge and passing the class. This category has two themes.  The first Success theme, Student behaviors that affect student success, has seven behavioral success factors: effort, organization, student-to-student interaction, focus on the course, risk aversion/course selection, creating a contextual image of their online learning class, and securing family support.  The second theme, personal characteristics has only two success factors: independent learner and visual learner.

The Persistence Category is defined as determination to succeed and has three themes.  The first theme, "What are the expectations and perceptions of online learners?" has two primary persistence factors: responsibility and effort. The second theme, "What goals and motivations influence online learning persistence and success?" had two primary persistence factors: family motivations and educational goals. The final theme,

"What values influence persistence of online learners?" has four persistence factors: life style needs, academic achievement, family, and learning.

These themes that emerged from the grounded theory are not "one size fits all." The voices of the students must be looked at from a multigenerational and situational level to truly address the students' needs. The answer to Research Question Two, What understanding or meaning emerges about learning persistence and success in online courses? Focuses on these findings by showing the variation in responses, based on the student's age and life situation. Understanding learning persistence and success from a multigenerational and situational focus gives more meaning to the overall thematic findings discussed previously.

Table 9 shows the findings for research question 1.

**Table 9**

*Categories, Themes and Factors Summary of Findings for Research Question One*

| Categories, Themes and Factors | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Learning Category** | | | **Persistence Category** | | | **Success Category** | |
| Faculty Effect Theme | Instructional Design Theme | Organizational Systems Theme | Online Learner Expectation Theme | Goals Motivation Theme | Values Theme | Student Behavior Theme | Personal Characteristics Theme |
| 1.Interaction | 1.Organization | 1.Availability | 1. Responsibility | 1. Family Factor | 1. Academic achievement life style | 1.Effort | 1. Independent Learner |
| 2. Social Presence | 2.Discusion Board | 2.Lower no costs | 2. Choice Convenience flexibility | 2.High Grades Learning | 2.Family Factor | 2.Organization | 2. Visual |
| 3.Oganization | 3.Team Activities | 3.More courses & teachers | 3.Timely Faculty Responses | 3. Self Esteem | 3. Learning | 3.student to student interaction | |
| 4.Flexibility | 4.Communication Tools | | 4.Learning | 4. Career/ Job | | 4.Focus | |
| 5.Accessibility | 5.Technical Support | | 5. Overcoming Obstacles | 5. Balanced work life | | 5.course selection & risk aversion | |
| 6.Extra Credit | 6.Testing Onsite | | | | | 6. Family Support | |

Research Question Two: What Understanding or Meaning Emerges about Learning

Persistence and Success in Online Courses?

Through the appreciative inquiry data collection and grounded theory analysis of
the data, the following new meanings and understandings were discovered. Starting with
the first interview question, it was clear that there were differences in responses and that
the differences were greater for some factors than for others. These different responses
appeared to come from specific groups of students, distinguished by age and situation. As
a result, this researcher discovered that the meaning and understanding coming from the
interviews were that learning persistence and success do not fit into a "one size fits all"
formula.  Having worked with a diverse group of students, this researcher believes that
the voices of the students must be heard from a multigenerational and situational level to
truly address the students' needs. In addition, the findings from the students' appreciative
inquiry must receive a deeper analysis. Therefore, this section focuses on the research
findings to show the variation in responses based on the student's age and life situation.
Our understanding of learning persistence and success must come not only from the
aggregated data but also from the unique voices of the individuals.

These findings offer multigenerational and situation information, which expands
our understanding of the learners and the meaning they expressed in the themes and
factors. Analyzing this data was not an easy task. However, if we are teaching different
types of learners, we need to identify their perceptions and needs.

The findings for Research Question Two show the specific factors and themes
that are prevalent in each of the six identified groupings: older, younger, Middle Age,
parent, military, and foreign-born students.  This researcher spent additional time

describing each group's factors in order to pay attention to the multiple generations' and life situations' perceptions and needs and to be their voice. It is this researcher's belief that in order to have persistent and successful students engaging in online courses, designers and instructors need to take into account the direction from which their learner is coming and meet them there. The following sections describe each theme and its significant findings for each of the six groupings.

*Older Student Profile*

The older students, aged 36-60 years, were one of the largest groupings – 14 out of 30 students, or 47% of the 30 students studied. Many of these older students also fell into the other life situational categories of parent, military, or foreign-born. Of the older students, 3 were also disabled. One in particular took the same class several times and failed because he did not complete his final. He indicated that sometimes it took so long for his course to load on his computer that he fell asleep and missed deadlines. Yet the following term, he took the class again. The faculty person indicated she thought that this student just liked the socialization and showing that he knew the topic. This student came to the interview expressing dissatisfaction with the Web Page layouts and lack of communication tools in some classes. Another disabled student lost her husband and had been ill for years. Her doctor prescribed taking courses as a way to help her rehabilitate. She chose online classes because she has very low self-esteem. She did not want others to see her inadequacies. After taking several online classes, she is now more confident and ready for all types of classes. The following figures show the data from the older student's perspective.

Figure 1 shows the findings for the Learning Category for Older Students.

## Older Student: Faculty Role Learning Factors
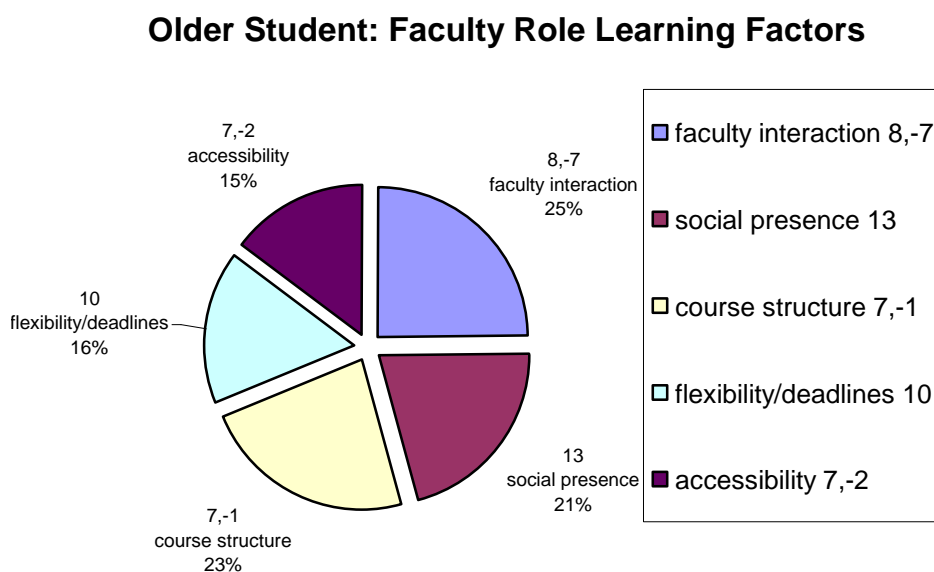


*Figure 1.* **Learning factor of faculty role for older students.**

   The older students take online courses with some degree of apprehension. They

may not be familiar with the technology, and it has been many years since they were in

the student role. Three of the older students defined themselves as disabled; the

flexibility offered by online classes allowed them to fit in their doctor's visits and

accommodate health setbacks. They appreciated faculty interaction ($n$=8) in response to

their questions, but they did not expect it. Sometimes they were really challenged by the

course and believed they were left to fend for themselves ($n$=-7). The assumption that

they would be on their own as learners was so pervasive that this group of students often

took courses in subjects they already knew so that they could be successful. Social

presence ($n$=13), or the clear idea that other unique individuals were in the class with

them, was important for those who were isolated by physical distance or the inability to

contact others easily.  Some socialized via the discussion board, offering their years of experience, while other students just enjoyed the conversations of others.

Course structure and organization (*n*=7,-1) was an important factor because of these students' older computers, slow Internet connections, failing eyesight, and slower reflexes. Navigation and uploading time were impediments to them. They requested that the WebCT home pages all look alike with left side menu bars because the icons took longer to load.  It was challenging to remember where assignments went, how to find grades, and the faculty's preferred email contact method. This researcher must agree with them. Navigating these five online classes to find the discussion boards, email sites, and syllabi took extra time and effort.

Older students preferred flexibility on deadlines and assignments. They could get the work done, but often the work had to be done on their own schedule.  Finally, the accessibility of the course made the difference between their continuing to be learners or not. Older students would not have gone to a face-to-face class unless it was in their neighborhood. Here is one student's comment:

> #9. The online course allows me to have flexibility with my time. I can do all course work from the same computer without keeping and carrying files around with me on disk. Feedback from quizzes is immediate.  No waiting to see what you may have misunderstood.

Therefore, for the older student, the faculty's role is to offer quick feedback, provide good course organization, and check in with them to see if they have questions, can find the material, and are connecting with others in the class. Faculty interaction and a course structure that allowed for communication and social presence opportunities

would increase their engagement in the online class. In addition, faculty must understand why they take an online class and be flexible about deadlines or offer extra credit.

Figure 2 describes the findings for the older student regarding instructional design. The student's use these items to assist their learning.
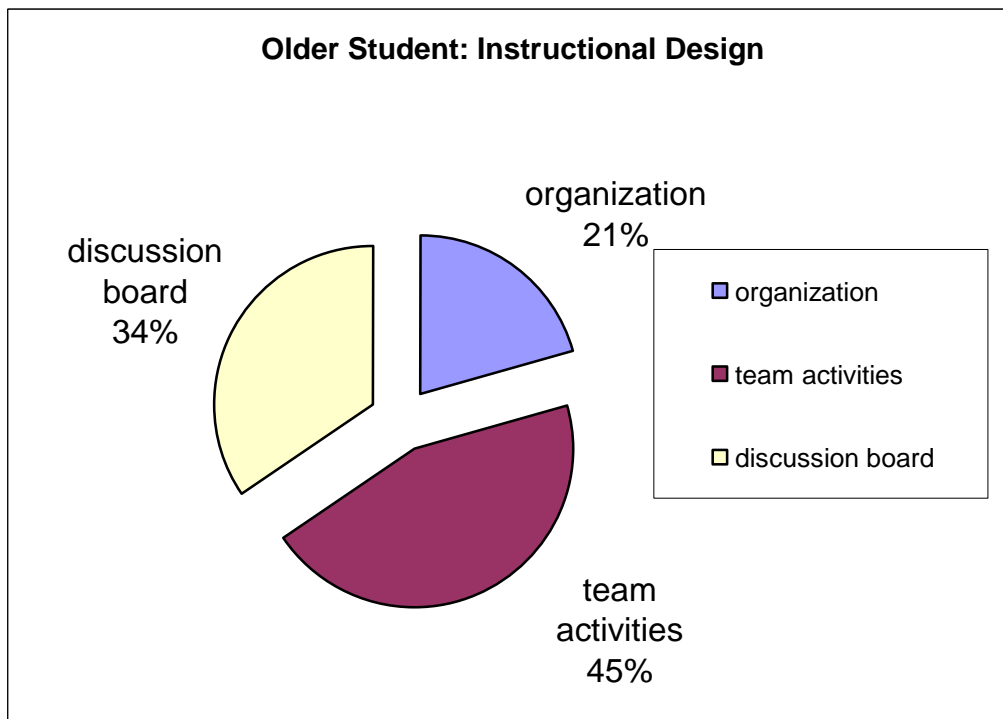


*Figure 2*. **Learning factor of instructional design for older students.**

Older students' primary issue concerning instructional design focused on team activities with 13 negative comments (*n*=-13). They did not like having to work with other students on teams because others lack commitment and organizational skills. They valued hard work and responsibility, yet lacked the online interpersonal skills to organize the others and accomplish tasks. Some suggested that the faculty play a monitoring role to ensure that everyone participated equally and to offer guidance. Four out of five of the courses studied involved some sort of team activity in the grade.

The older students valued the discussion board as a place to ask questions and to show what they knew about a topic. Courses that did not use the discussion board for interaction among the students or that did not have a discussion board at all were found to hinder their ability to get and give answers quickly. Therefore, it is important to take into account the older students' assumption that the faculty will not be online frequently enough to meet their learning needs by communicating clearly when and how frequently contacts will occur. Otherwise the older student will be uncertain and may or may not participate in the discussion board depending on their comfort level.

Again, uniform organization of the website for all courses was a strong request from the older students, for the reasons stated previously. This instructional design request is somewhat of a system design issue. The older students had two other online system design comments. They wanted more course offerings and faculty. Finally, they felt that the courses were too expensive and should be free. Figure 3 describes the older student success factors.

**Older Student Success Factors**
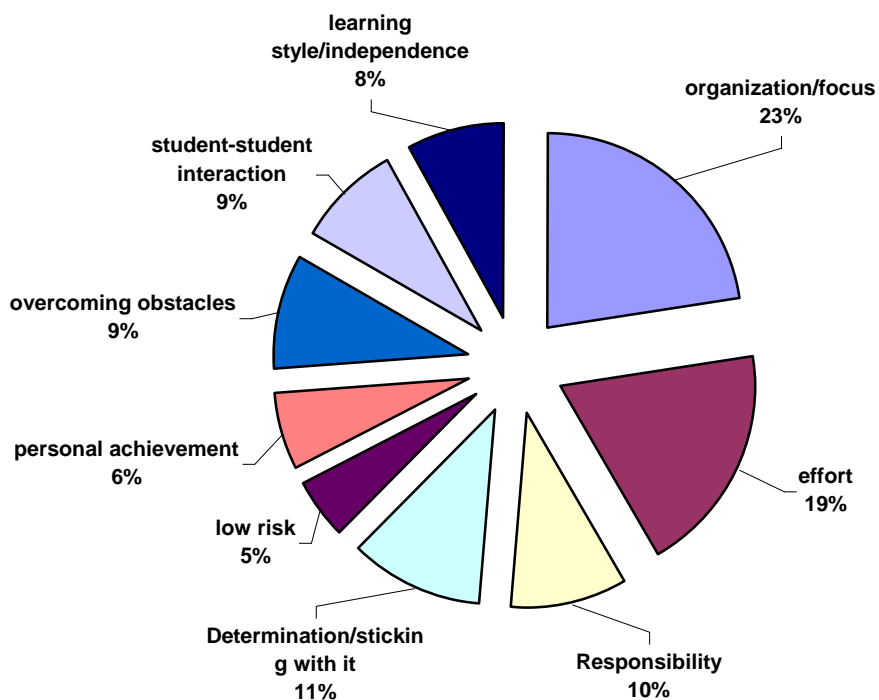


*Figure 3.* **Success factors for older students.**

The success factor of organization and focus, manifested in working hard, and completing assignments on time, was the most prominent factor for the older student. It is easy to see why effort came in a close second. In fact, most of the older students' stories talked about effort and organization as the basic skills necessary to be successful. Many students in the younger group learned this fact the hard way, but the older group took it for granted that they would have to put in effort.

The older students compensated for their possible obstacles, primarily by taking easy classes on topics they already knew.  The older students' stories were full of challenges due to illness, lack of family support, financial difficulties, and low resiliency. What appears to have helped them to overcome these obstacles is reaching out to the other students in class and asking for help. Sometimes the older students were the ones offering a different type of help to the younger students. The importance older students place on student-to-student interaction can make all the difference for them.  Faculty need to be aware that the opportunity to discuss online is new and rewarding for the older student. Designing online courses with the older student in mind implies offering discussion opportunities on not only course content but also other educationally related topic, the more opportunities for asynchronous conversation among the students the better the learning for the older student.  Figure 4 shows the older students' persistence factors.

**Older Student Persistence Factors**

Personal
Achievement
Value
18%

Responsibility
Expectation
27%

Family Value
10%

Faculty
Support/Response
Expectation
6%

Desire to Learn
Motivation
14%

Flexible Schedule
Career/job    10%
4%

Self Esteem
Motivation
11%
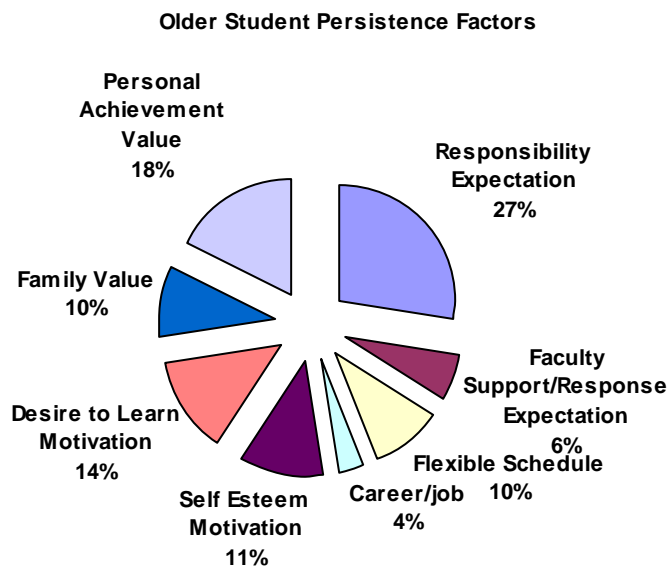
*Figure 4.*  **Persistence factors for older students.**

The older students defined persistence as determination or "sticking with it."
Their expectations were that they would take responsibility for their success and that
faculty would provide timely responses to their questions.

In the persistence theme of values, personal achievement in passing an online
class and proving to the family that they could learn online were their two most important
values. Some older students even talked about going to college as a tribute to those who
had died. Others wanted to prove to their adult children and spouses that they could
overcome their obstacles and stick with it.

Finally, the motivating factors for online older students were, first, a strong desire
to learn, a need to build their self-esteem, and, hopefully, to redirect their career or find a
better job.  Their motivating factors gave them the drive to persist in their online class.

The following story captures the values, motivations, and determination of the older student:

#9. There are many things I value about my background that helped me be successful in DL classes. I have never been afraid of hard work and did hard physical work for many years. I decided it was now time to put the brain back to work and go back to school. I was raised with the adage that anything worth doing is worth doing right. I guess you could call it old-school values. Your work is a reflection on you as a person, and even if it is not perfect, you need to know for yourself that you have done the best you can.

Overall, the older student is a perfect candidate for online courses. With intentionally designed course structure, faculty organization that has features with lower bandwidth requirements, larger font, alternative communication tools, flexibility in timed course assignments and faculty checking in and providing regular feedback, they can persist in their courses to learn and succeed.

*Younger Student Profile*

The younger students, ages 20-26, have a very different set of perceptions and preferences.  They bring with them years of skills interacting online with peers in a variety of media, including text messaging, instant messaging, game playing, Skyping, and surfing websites designed for their communication needs, such as My Space and FaceBook.  They are multi-taskers at an early age.  For example, younger students wanted to be interviewed on the phone rather than online or face-to-face. The phone provided them more flexibility than even the computer. One student being interviewed by telephone gave very short answers that showed no reflective thinking. When asked the

question, when are you most engaged in your online classes, she said that she was not

engaged.  She just did the work.  When asked, what is it like to not be engaged in your

classes but still passing, she responded that she knew she was missing out on things but

she was working full time, lived in Santa Fe, and just did not have time to focus; she just

wanted her degree.  Another younger student, when asked if she was ready for the

interview, said yes. This student gave very short answers and, after a few minutes, was

interrupted by someone asking her for money. It sounded like the other party was at the

door. When the interview ended, this researcher asked what the noises in the background

were. She indicated she was at the gas station pumping gas during the interview.

Apparently, "being ready" for this 20-year-old student meant she was multitasking by

participating in the interview during driving time.

　　　　With these brief stories in mind, the data that follow will introduce you to the

younger online student.  The following are the findings from the younger online students'

interview data.

**Table 10**

*Younger Student Learning Category: Online Faculty Role Theme and Factors*

| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Faculty interaction | 33 | 33 | 32% |
| Organization | 14,-7 | 21 | 20% |
| Flexibility/deadlines/extra credit | 13 | 13 | 13% |
| Social presence | 11,-1 | 12 | 12% |
| Learning new knowledge definition | 10 | 10 | 10% |
| Accessibility | 7 | 7 | 7% |
| Application definition | 7 | 7 | 7% |
| Total | | 103 | 100% |

Table 10 shows that faculty interaction with the student is the most important role faculty can play for the younger learner. Younger learners just come to class expecting quick faculty responses to their questions. Social presence ($n=12$) is a related factor. This involves not just lessening the psychological distance and realizing that real people are in the class, but also being social in the communication sites. Younger students use the online organizational interactive features of a discussion board, chats, and virtual café's to hang out and learn about how to succeed in college and life. However, interaction online is sometimes challenging because, when working on teams or groups, they must produce at the level of the group within expected timeframes and others are dependent on them. This can sometimes cause conflict.

These students need organization (n=-7) and structure in the class because they are speeding through the material and assignments. Organization is sometimes a problem because younger students have real difficulties finding time for assignments, or even logging into the class. The online class actually helps them to become more organized. These students quickly learned that they would fail if they don't learn to focus and be responsible. Therefore, reminders, easy-to-follow instructions, flexible deadlines, and extra credit are tools they rely on to make online courses work for them.

**Table 11**

***Younger Student Learning Category: Instructional Design Theme and Factors***

| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Organized course structure | 16 | 16 | 31% |
| Discussion board/communication tools | 11 | 11 | 22% |
| Team activities | 3,-5 | 8 | 16% |
| Online support/online resources | 3,-3 | 6 | 12% |
| Lower/no costs | 5 | 5 | 10% |
| Increase number of courses | 3 | 3 | 6% |
| Testing onsite | -2 | 2 | 4% |
| Total | | 51 | 100% |

The data again show that course structure is the most important design feature, followed by communication tools and discussion board opportunities. Team activities produced negative experiences for young students, but not as negative as the experiences for the older student. Online support (*n*=3,-3) was both a positive and negative

experience because they wanted help to be available on a daily basis and had to resort to asking their colleagues for help when they could not find the help and support with the content and homework assignments. An additional instructional feature that is important to note is the problem of going onsite for testing. The distance, limited timing, and parking were real problems. Students asked, Don't they know why we are taking online classes? Finally, the younger students also wanted the costs to be lowered and the number of online classes to be increased. These students took one or more online classes per term.

*Success Category for Younger Students: Themes and Factors*

**Table 12**

***Younger Student Success Category: Themes and Factors***

| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Organization | 36,-5 | 41 | 31% |
| Effort | 36 | 36 | 27% |
| Responsibility | 10,-4 | 14 | 11% |
| Focus | 6,-5 | 11 | 8% |
| Student-student interaction | 11 | 11 | 8% |
| Passing/learning | 9 | 9 | 7% |
| Overcoming obstacles | 6 | 6 | 5% |
| Family support | 3,-1 | 4 | 3% |
| Total | | 132 | 100% |

Success for the younger student involves passing and gaining new knowledge or learning. The success category for younger students has four main factors. These are the personal factors of organization ($n=36,-5$), effort ($n=36$), responsibility ($n=10,-4$), and student-to-student interaction ($n=11$). These factors consistently dominate the success category for all groups, and some are found in the persistence category as well. Because three of these factors arose out of responses from both success and persistence questions, they will be reported in both contexts.

Personal organization is the key to success for younger students, and yet it is also their weaker skill. Their prior educational institutions, homes, or clubs either taught them learning habits of organization, effort, and responsibility or they did not. As a result, the rubber meets the road in the online class. Younger students described how they quickly have to make themselves be responsible or fail the class. Focus is critical to this group; having been accustomed to teachers pushing them to complete their assignments on time, it is an area of weakness for them.

The data suggest that student-to-student interaction is a great tool for learning, not only for the content of the class but also how to learn in the class. The older students get to offer their suggestions and be role models without the younger students knowing they are accepting help from an elder. It doesn't take long for some to catch on and to form relationships with like group members. Those critical six weeks, as Tinto says, can be supported by some online class interaction activities.

Finally, this group identified that overcoming barriers to their online learning was important to their success. Their family played an ambiguous role, sometimes helpful and sometimes not helpful. The family can pressure young students to perform and to get a

degree before they are ready to learn.  On the other hand, the family can also help if it

knows the student is slacking off, as students may expect to do in online classes.

Figure 5 describes the younger student persistence factors.

*Persistence Theme and Factors for Younger Students*

**Younger Student: Persistence Theme and Factors**
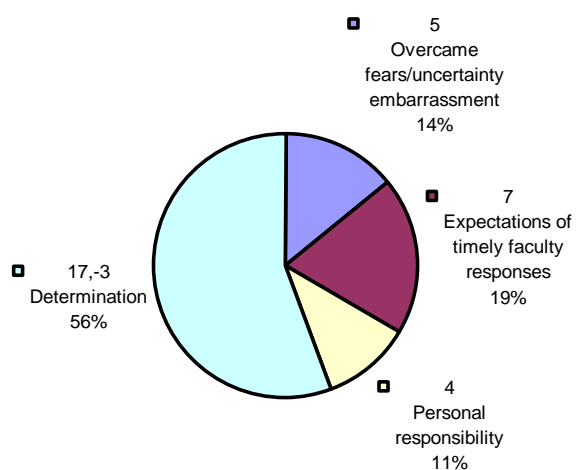


*Figure 5.*  **Younger student persistence theme and factors.**

Younger students' definition of persistence is determination or "sticking with it."

Figure 5 shows that sticking with it is the most important, but also the most challenging,

persistence factor. With so many competing demands, interests, and pleasures presenting

themselves to young people, they see their lack of ability to "stick to it" as a problem.

Unlike the older student who has a vision of career achievement and past experiences of

personal and sometimes academic successes, the younger students' intents are scattered.

Persistence is a necessary factor for all online learners, because so much of the work is

independent and requires some awareness of their learning style or metacognitive

abilities.   Younger students expect that faculty and other students will keep them focused

and on track. Distracting fears about their ability to succeed, uncertainties about managing their lives, and embarrassment that they might make mistakes divert their attention from looking at their own need to be more responsible (*n*=11) for their own learning.

Figure 6 describes the younger student persistence theme and motivation/values factors.

**Younger Student: Persistence, Motivation/Values Theme**
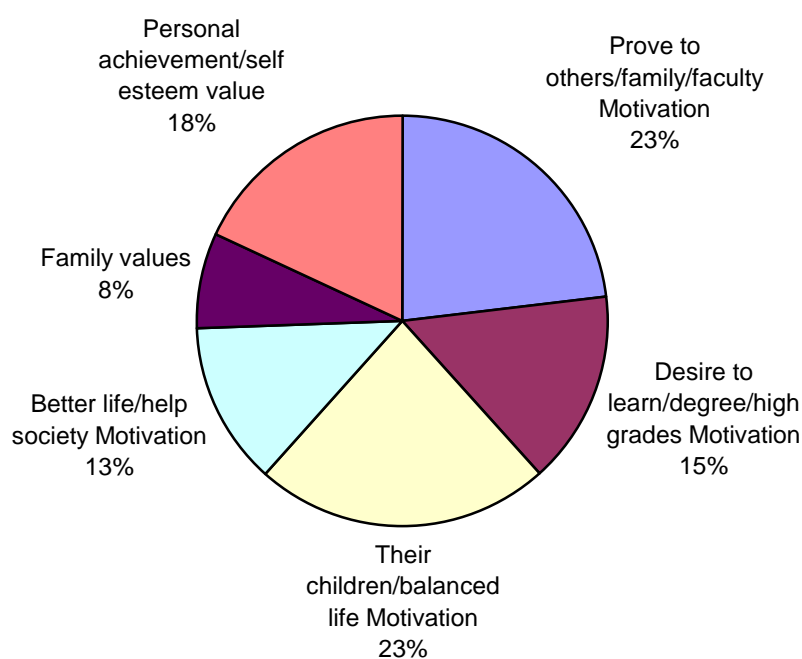


*Figure 6.* **Younger student persistence category, motivation/values themes and factors.**

Figure 6 shows the motivations and values that contribute to the younger students' persistence. This theme had no negative comments, so the percentages are based on total units for those two themes combined. Many students had children early and are now returning to school. The parents were the most highly motivated of the young learners.

Those who were influenced by their family to get an education while they were young were motivated to please others.  Others were proving they could do it all – work, family, and school.  Interestingly, these students were motivated not only to have a better life but also to help society. These driving forces fostered persistence when their expectations and responsibility levels needed to be adjusted. All of the younger students completed and persisted to take another online course, but only after considerable attention and support from faculty and fellow colleagues.

Figure 7 shows the Middle Age students' learning factors.

*Middle Age Student Profile*

**Middle Age Student Learning Factors**
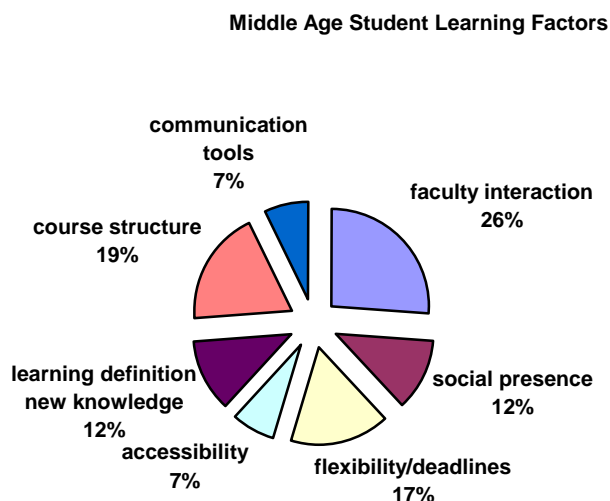


*Figure 7.*  **Middle Age Student Learning Factors.**

The four middle age students are between 27 and 35 years old, mostly single and male.  They are taking online classes because their jobs are changing. They want to get an education in order to redirect their career. Their voices are very soft in the data because

they identified few barriers. They defined learning as gaining new knowledge. And as a learner, they wanted faculty interaction to be regular, several times a week.  As with the other two age groups, they wanted clear course structure and an organized faculty.  Social presence was of medium importance to them.

Figure 8 shows the Middle Age student's success factors.

**Middle Age Student: Success Factors**
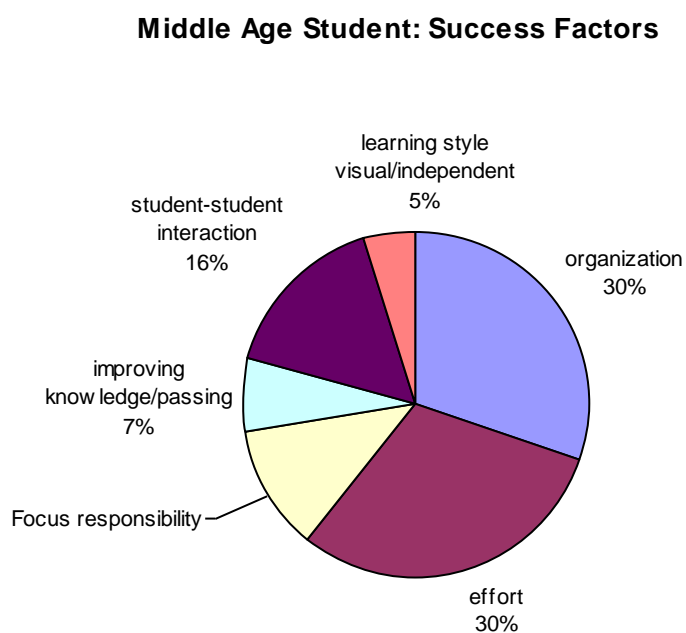


*Figure 8.*  **Middle Age student's success factors.**

The Middle Age students' definition of success was the same as for the older and younger students: improving knowledge and passing.  They said they needed to be organized, and that organization as well as putting in a considerable amount of effort was needed in order to be successful.  They were responsible and focused. Indeed, their effort paid off: this group had high grades in their online class and returned to take another online class. Finally, they valued their interaction with other students in the course.

Table 13 describes the Middle Age student persistence themes and factors.

**Table 13**

*Middle Age Student: Persistence Themes and Factors: Motivation, Values and*

*Expectations*

| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Desire to learn/degree motivation | 5 | 5 | 36% |
| Overcoming Fears | 3 | 3 | 21% |
| Responsibility | 2 | 2 | 14% |
| Prove to others/deaths/faculty motivation | 2 | 2 | 14% |
| Legacy/family pride value | 2 | 2 | 14% |
| Total | | 14 | 100% |

The Middle Age students define persistence as determination and are motivated

by the desire to learn and achieve a degree. They talked about overcoming obstacles like

fears and the logistics of balancing work and school. Their predominant value was a

desire to have their family be proud of them and to leave a legacy of some sort to their

family.

Overall, it is clear that their responses fell in the Middle Age level in all three

categories. This is the group to which faculty design and teaches, even though the Middle

Age group 27-35 years old was the smallest group of students in this study. It would be

good to assess the age range of the online students.

*Parent Student Profile*

There were 11 participants who self-identified as parents at some point during

their interview. For the most part, they answered the interview questions in the discussion

board and offered some of the most personal and vibrant stories of their experiences with online learning.  The online parent or single mother student has decided that it is more convenient and economical to be at home with children, not paying a babysitter and still getting an education. These students feel that online learning is their only option at this time, and they are very grateful to have this opportunity.  Individuals in this group are members of all three age groups, ranging from having very young children to young adult children.  The value they place on family and children is a driving force for them to complete their courses successfully.

One particular story stood out during the interviews. It shows the level of commitment of students who are parents. One interviewee in the younger student group is a struggling working parent who described herself as an ex-convict on parole. Besides working full-time, she lives alone and cares for her nine-month-old baby.  She can't afford Internet access but does have a laptop computer. After working until late hours at night, she packs up her baby in her old car and drives to a nearby hotel with wireless Internet access. Mother and baby stay parked in the car so the mother can use the Internet for her class assignments.  Often her assignments are late, but she gets them done.  This is just one example of obstacles that these students creatively try to overcome or work around.  The following table shows the beliefs and needs of the parent student to learn successfully.

**Table 14**

*Parent Students Learning Category Themes and Factors*

| Learning Theme 1: Online Faculty Role | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENT |
| Faculty interaction | 42,-1 | 43 | 36% |
| Organization | 22,-1 | 23 | 19% |
| Social presence | 18 | 18 | 15% |
| Flexibility/deadlines/extra credit | 17 | 17 | 14% |
| Accessibility | 9 | 9 | 8% |
| Learning/memory/application | 8 | 8 | 7% |
| Total faculty role theme factors | | 118 | 6% |

For parent students (*n*=11), learning involves acquiring new knowledge, memory, and application. The findings show that faculty interaction (*n*=42,-1) is important and requires faculty to be online regularly. It is the key to the parent students' success. Social needs surpass the even more basic organization (*n*=23) factor and course structure needs (*n*=19). Faculty interaction and the social presence of others online are critical to them. That is why the discussion board (*n*=9) was identified as a helpful feature in their online classes. Having the accessibility of online courses has opened the door to these parent students. It is important for course interaction features to let them know that there are a teacher and other students right beyond it. The interviews with parent students included some negative comments about faculty who did not respond to student questions for a long time, poor organization of the material, and processing of grades.

Table 14 (continued)

**Learning Theme 2: Instructional design**

| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Factors | Units | Total | Percentage |
| Course structure | 17,-2 | 19 | 43% |
| Discussion board | 9 | 9 | 16% |
| Technology | 6,-1 | 7 | 16% |
| Lower/no costs | 4 | 4 | 9% |
| Communication tools | 3 | 3 | 68% |
| Team activities | 1,-1 | 2 | 6% |
| Total instructional design | | 44 | 100% |

In addition, the course structures, which often included team activities, caused much anxiety and fear that other students could get in the way of their success. Also the technology features, although for the most part identified as helpful when parent students could not solve a problem, could slow them down. They wanted clear, organized course structures with easy-to-find links for directions. Deadlines and short test times were two other barriers. They had interruptions at home that took them off track. When emergencies arose, they left the class and took care of their children.

Therefore, parent students appreciate flexible due dates or extra credit work to compensate for missed deadlines. Finally, although they value the accessibility of the online class, they think the costs are high. Some students described how difficult it is to get the funds for an online course at Central New Mexico Community College, where the

cost is $30 per credit hour. Parent students realized that it is not only the faculty and

course design that are important in an online class but also the organizational system such

as policies of cost, faculty availability and number of courses. For the most part, the

parent students interviewed knew they had to be the responsible person. No one could do

it but them.

Table 15 describes the parent student success factors.

**Table 15**

*Parent Student: Success Category, Themes and Factors*

| **Success Theme 1: Behaviors** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Organization | 40 | 40 | 35% |
| Effort | 38 | 38 | 33% |
| Responsibility | 24,-1 | 25 | 22% |
| Student-student interaction | 19,-1 | 20 | 17% |
| Passing | 9 | 9 | 8% |
| Focus | 5 | 5 | 4% |
| Independence | 4 | 4 | 3% |
| Overcoming obstacles | 4 | 4 | 3% |
| Imagining context of online class | 3 | 3 | 3% |
| Family support | 2 | 2 | 2% |
| Total | | 115 | 100% |

The primary success factors for the parent student are personal organization, effort, responsibility, and student-to-student interaction. This independent group defines success as passing. They often said that they enjoyed learning independently, as opposed to being in a group or class. As mentioned earlier in Research Question 1, a new and unusual factor for this group was imagining the context of an online class. Their stories revealed two ways in which they would describe their learning situation to the rest of the family. As one example, a wife would tell her husband she was going to class now, and that was a cue for him to take their children out for a while. As mentioned earlier, there was the example of a mother student explaining to her seven- and nine-year-olds that this is where mommy goes when she is in school. She sits at a computer in the study and they need to be quiet so she can concentrate. Parent students even describe pretending that they are in a face-to-face classroom so they can get into the learning frame of mind. Imagining or acting as if they were in an onsite class is an important success skill for these parent students. The older students did not visualize themselves in class and appeared to be more distant online learners. The younger students failed to be able to engage themselves mentally. This sometimes was reflected in lack of involvement in their learning.

Persistence Category for Parent Students: Themes and Factors is described in Table 16.

**Table 16**

*Parent Student Persistence Category: Themes and Factors*

| **Persistence Category Theme 1: Expectations** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Understand why taking online classes | 20 | 20 | 38% |
| Easy vs. hard work | 5,-2 | 7 | 14% |
| Overcome uncertainties | 4 | 4 | 8% |
| Total | | 52 | 100% |

| **Persistence Category Theme 2: Goals/motivations** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Balance home, school, work life | 4 | 4 | 13% |
| Career development/job | 3 | 3 | 10% |
| Academic success/learning | 6 | 6 | 19% |
| Their children's better life | 18 | 18 | 58% |
| Total | | 31 | 100% |

| **Persistence Category Theme 3: Values** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Personal achievement | 21 | 21 | 64% |
| Legacy/family pride/family | 12 | 12 | 36% |
| Total | | 33 | 100% |

The parent student group again defined persistence as determination ($n$=21). They often said, "Don't they understand why I am taking online classes" ($n$=20), because their motivations were very clear to them. Helping their children have a better life was their primary responsibility, which they translated to mean that they should be successful academically in order to get a better job. They described overcoming childcare issues, illness, lack of time, and fatigue and self-denial to reach their goals. Online classes were a way to balance home and school, and sometimes work as well. They came to the online class thinking it would be easy, or at least easier than going through all the effort of an onsite class. But soon they found that it involved hard work and they needed to be organized and responsible.  They discovered that they have to put in the effort in order to be successful.  Their value for personal achievement was fueled by their value for the family. These two powerful values propelled them into online courses again and again despite uncertainties and distractions that sometimes led to low grades. The single-parent student of an infant who made late-night trips to the nearby hotel for Internet service demonstrates determination combined with a vision resulting in creative problem solving that led to her passing.  She is the poster child for the online parent learner.  Persistence is internal, subjective, and fueled by whatever motivations, values, and expectations it takes to stick with it. But for parent learners, that fuel is an image of a better life for their children. Few images are more compelling.

*Foreign Student Profile*

There were three self-identified foreign students in the study:  Mexican, Vietnamese, and Middle Eastern. Foreign students are defined in this study as not born in the United States. Although their numbers are small, there were some significant

differences in their learning, persistence, and success factors, findings that are worth discussing. One characteristic observed from face-to-face interviews with two foreign students and an online interview with another foreign student is their level of intensity and energy for learning and success. They demonstrated an earnest interest in how to be successful and appeared to be more self-reflective than the other students. They were the only students able to answer the question about how their background, culture, or situation positively influenced their success. The reason they were able to identify their cultural background is that they were able to claim their own culture and talk about it. The USA students tended to identify with the American culture which is a composite of so many cultures and too familiar to them. They were unable to identify its particular educational values.

One foreign student indicated she had difficulty answering how her background influenced her because she said all parents want their children to do better than them. All parents would sacrifice for their children's future and support them in any way they could. By attending college as a first-generation student, she was improving her education, her family's name, and the name of her country.  That is what she thought was expected of everyone. When this researcher tried to explain that each culture looks at education differently, she was amazed and incredulous.

The sense of cultural pride and duty to their culture was far more visible in the interviews with foreign students than in interviews with the other students, who had difficulty identifying their background or heritage. Most students just talked about their life situation and sometimes their extended family members. But none of the other 30 students talked about any foreign heritage. As a result, this researcher assumes our

melting pot has melted in this sample, leaving us with no clues about how our cultural

background can be helpful to our learning.

The findings for the foreign student group follow. This section focuses on only

the most significant findings, as it was apparent by now where the findings are similar to

the other groups.

Table 17 shows the foreign student learning factors.

**Table 17**

*Foreign Student: Learning Category, Themes, and Factors*

| Learning Category Theme 1: Online faculty role | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Social presence | 23 | 23 | 36% |
| Faculty interaction | 14,-1 | 15 | 23% |
| Course structure/organization | 9,-1 | 10 | 16% |
| Discussion board/communications | 7 | 7 | 11% |
| Accessibility | 5 | 5 | 8% |
| Flexibility/deadlines/extra credit | 4 | 4 | 6% |
| Total | | 64 | 100% |

Foreign students ($n=3$) define learning as gaining new knowledge ($n=8$) and less

so as memory ($n=4$) or application ($n=3$) of the knowledge. The most outstanding factor

in the learning category is social presence. These students enjoyed getting to know other

students, giving and receiving help, and learning how to be successful in college and life.

Social presence involves not only recognizing that there are real people but also taking

that awareness to the socializing level.  Faculty interaction was also important and

noticed when it was not forthcoming in a timely manner. Faculty interaction usually

involved asking content questions, although there was a late-night person-to-person type

of conversation about lifestyle and working into the early morning hours. This interaction

helped to personalize the teacher, which motivated the student. Faculty encouragement

was also appreciated, just as a positive word about homework was helpful. In addition to

the teacher saying thank you when homework was turned in, a comment about the

student's work would cause a student to participate at higher levels.  Positive feedback

and personal recognition of students during the term were considered best practices, and

students re-enrolled in those classes.

Table 18 demonstrates the foreign students' success factors.

**Table 18**

*Foreign Student: Success Category, Themes and Factors*

| Success Category Theme 1: Behaviors | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Organization | 21 | 21 | 26% |
| Effort | 21 | 21 | 26% |
| Student-student interaction | 14,-1 | 15 | 18% |
| Responsibility | 13 | 13 | 16% |
| Overcoming obstacles | 5 | 5 | 7% |
| Imaging online context | 3 | 3 | 4% |
| Independence | 2 | 2 | 2% |
| Improving knowledge/passing definition | 2 | 2 | 2% |
| Total | | 82 | 100% |

The success factors of being organized, putting in effort, and taking responsibility are important for the foreign student group. Student-to-student interaction is especially important for online foreign students. They learn not only the content of the course but also the cultural tools that will help them be even more successful in this society. They identified overcoming obstacles as a necessary behavior in order to be successful. Unlike the other students, they did not go into detail about the obstacles, focusing more on overcoming them. It is important to notice that imaging online context was also a useful tool for these students. The ability to visualize the class and successful behaviors and to

describe those images to others helped alleviate the distance that they might have felt in

an online class. Table 19 shows the foreign students' persistence factors.

**Table 19**

*Foreign Student: Persistence Category, Expectations/Perceptions Themes and Factors*

**Persistence Category Theme 1:  Expectations/Perceptions**

| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Determination definition | 13 | 13 | 59% |
| Responsibility | 10 | 10 | 45% |
| Focus | 5 | 5 | 23% |
| Learning expectation | 4 | 4 | 18% |
| Personal responsibility expectations | 3 | 3 | 14% |
| Total | | 22 | 100% |

**Persistence Category Theme 2:  Goals/Motivations**

| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Family influence | 8 | 8 | 50% |
| Desire to learn | 6 | 6 | 38% |
| Career development/job | 2 | 2 | 13% |
| Total | | 16 | 100% |

**Persistence Category Theme 3:  Values**

| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Family/legacy/family pride | 7 | 7 | 44% |
| Personal achievement | 7 | 7 | 44& |
| Learning | 2 | 2 | 12% |
| Total | | 16 | 100% |

In looking at the foreign student data in Table 19, it may appear that there is little difference from the other groups. However, this researcher found subtle differences in interpretation of the factors.  In general, in goals and motivation factors, the family appears to play a significant role. What is not clear is which family – their own or their extended family. In the case of the foreign student, it is the extended family and even the community that influences their success. There are family expectations and long-term goals that must be met in order to be an honorable member of the extended family and country.  On the other hand, personal achievement is as strong a value as the influence of family. This combination of values is a driving force for the foreign students, but in a slightly different way from the parent students. The foreign students were coming from a more collectivist perspective rather than an individualistic and self-oriented perspective. In fact, many of the factors apparent in other groups did not receive any units for the foreign students. These students are determined and take responsibility, doing so from a place of family pride and responsibility.  Online faculty and staff need to be aware of these subtle differences for this minority group so that they can address the needs of all students and encourage their values.

*Military Student Profile*

There were two military students in the participant pool, and both are about to retire from the military. Although this is a very small minority group, the potential for the military group to have an increased interest in distance learning is high. It is for this reason and because there were some unique factors that the unique military voices in this study are worth sharing.  One of the two military students interviewed face-to-face, and the other did so in the discussion board.

The face-to-face interviewee from BA 255 Supervision was a very competent trainer in the United States Air Force. He shared his enthusiasm for learning online through a story about taking a major world religions course online. During the time he took that course, he traveled to Saudi Arabia and Israel, where he met Muslims and Jews. He shared his textbook and assignments with his fellow travelers and learned that the book was not accurate. He then shared their comments with his online teacher. His excitement at the combination of guided learning in the online class and his actual experiences was a model of engaged learning. He brought those high expectations to his BA 255 Supervision class. He was very serious about the fact that he would soon be getting a civilian position in Washington, DC, and that this course could help him be a better supervisor.

In addition, he lamented the fact that during his 20 years of military service, he had taken numerous courses but had never been able to finish a degree because of his travel schedule. Now he had discovered online learning, and he felt certain that he would now be able to complete an online degree somewhere.

Both military students had high expectations for themselves and the class. As a result, they were more critical of the course structure, teacher organizational skills, and team activities. They were both "cut to the chase" kind of men. The following tables and text focus on the highlights of the group.

Table 20 shows the military students' learning factors.

**Table 20**

*Military Student: Learning Category, Themes and Factors*

| Learning Category Theme 1: Online Faculty Role | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Faculty interaction | 15 | 15 | 37% |
| Social presence | 10 | 10 | 24% |
| Organization | 3,-4 | 7 | 33% |
| Learning new knowledge | 5 | 5 | 12% |
| Application | 4 | 4 | 10% |
| Total | | 41 | 100% |
| **Learning Category Theme 2: Instructional design** | | | |
| Course structure and organization | 5 | 5 | 71% |
| Team activities | -2 | 2 | 29% |
| Total | | 7 | 100% |

As mentioned previously, these military students (*n*=2) brought with them the

expectations of faculty interaction, social presence, and the need for organization in their

online classes. They were very annoyed at inaccurate dates for the assignments, which

caused one of them to miss the deadline. They had more negative comments about the

teacher's organizational level than any other group, even though they were not in the

same online class. Most of their negative comments concerned non-business courses and

were just venting. The interview gave them the opportunity to vent, despite the fact that

the interview was an appreciative inquiry. In fact, it was quite challenging to find the

positive in one of the interviewee's answers.  Team activities were clearly a problem

area. Both students were very frustrated at the lack of commitment on the part of the

other students. They felt that they had to carry the whole burden of the project and asked

that this researcher request the faculty to monitor the group interaction.  This is similar to

how team activities were discussed across the groups and how team activities often

caused students to feel like dropping out.

Finally, the military students found the course structure to be helpful if it was well

organized, had opportunities for a discussion board, extra credit, online resources, and

flexible deadlines. These students did not mention a problem with onsite testing; it is this

researcher's understanding that they were released from onsite testing requirement.

Table 21 describes the military students' success factors.

**Table 21**

*Military Student: Success Category, Themes and Factors*

| Success Category Theme 1: Behaviors | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Student-student interaction | 12 | 12 | 32% |
| Responsibility | 11 | 11 | 30% |
| Independent learning style | 6 | 6 | 16% |
| Organization | 4 | 4 | 11% |
| Overcoming obstacles | 2 | 2 | 5% |
| Risk aversion/minimization | 2 | 2 | 5% |
| Total | 37 | 37 | 100% |

Interestingly, the success category for military students had a much lower count for personal organization and a higher rating for responsibility. This may show that military students are more focused on being responsible because they already have good organization skills.  This responsibility level (11) is quite high for two interviewees and appears to border on obsession about achievement. However, with only two people, it is difficult to make a definitive statement.  The military students did believe that student-to-student interaction was the most important factor for their success and liked having the discussion board in their classes. Basically, the findings show that they were independent learners who wanted to gain more knowledge for their career pursuits.

Table 22 shows the military students' persistence theme 1-3, factors.

**Table 22**

*Military Student: Persistence Category, Themes and Factors*

| Persistence Category Theme 1: Influences | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Learning expectations | 8 | 8 | 40% |
| Timely faculty responses | 5 | 5 | 25% |
| Personal responsibility | 5 | 5 | 25% |
| Effort | 2 | 2 | 10% |
| Total | 20 | 20 | 100% |

| Persistence Category Theme 2: Goals/Motivations | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Career development/job motivation | 3 | 3 | 60% |
| Self esteem motivation | 1 | 1 | 20% |
| Prove to others/deaths/faculty motivation | 1 | 1 | 20% |
| Total | 5 | 5 | 100% |

| Persistence Category Theme 3: Values | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| FACTORS | UNITS | TOTAL | PERCENTAGE |
| Personal achievement value | 5 | 5 | 100% |
| Total | | 5 | 100% |

The military student had the same definition of persistence as determination (*n*=7)

as did the other groups. Their highest persistence factor was expectations for learning

($n$=8).  Effort ($n$=2) was very low as a factor. It is possible that these students did not think the classes were rigorous enough for them.  They expected timely faculty responses, taking personal responsibility for their learning, and high levels of success for themselves and the class.  Their top motivation was to develop a career and to find a job ($n$=23).  One student shared his business website to show what his new career would be. Overall, their top value was personal and academic achievement ($n$=5), which drove them both to complete their course even after one student took a job in Washington, DC, in the middle of the course.

*Overall Summary, Research Question Two*

The findings for Research Question Two, "What understanding or meaning emerges about learning persistence and success in online courses," are that learning persistence and success do not fit into a "one size fits all" formula.  The voices of the students must be heard from a multigenerational and situational basis in order to truly identify and address the needs of the students. The findings from the students' appreciative inquiry have a new understanding and meaning when the factors of the online learners are examined from multigenerational and situational perspectives, as this section has done.  While there are similarities in definitions of categories, the themes

As achievement coach at the college, this researcher meets these students face to face daily. Their questions are the same, but how they perceive the answers varies greatly.  A simple case could have been made for the understanding and meaning found in the data, but it is the duty of a qualitative researcher to share the voices of those who wanted to let others hear these private stories and to share their thoughts for all to learn. It is this researcher's belief that they hoped their stories would reveal the Pandora's Box

of differences among learners and the need for online design to not only accommodate their success factors but also build on them for the future of online courses.

This section does not summarize the factors prevalent in each group because the numbers are small and it would appear to be generalizing or stereotyping. The point of sharing these findings is to increase awareness that learning persistence and success are not "one size fits all." The more that faculty and course designers can pay attention to student perceptions based on multigenerational and situational factors, the greater will be the learning persistence and success of online students and classes.

Research Question Three: What Provocative Proposal of Learning Persistence and

Success in Online Courses Emerges from the Data?

The findings for Research Question Three emerge from the student and faculty research data and the researcher's perspectives. While for questions One, Two and Four, only the participant research data were used to detail the findings for the resulting model, categories, themes, and factors regarding learning persistence and success for online learners. Before describing the provocative proposals for this study, it is important to share the underlying beliefs. Glaser and Strauss believe that the researcher "must be considered as a part of the social structure; and a developing theory must therefore take them and their statements into account as a slice of the data" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 254). Therefore, this section shares data about this researcher's background and why this research topic is important. In that way, this researcher's biases will be revealed and can be taken into account. The following background data come from the researcher.

*Researcher's Perspectives*

I bring to this study my background as a 54-year-old working class, first-generation college graduate. My cultural background is a second-generation American of French and Lithuanian descent. My background brought with it both some positives and negatives.

In the course of my studies at University of New Mexico, I resonated with theorists and writers like Freire, Seligman, Moore, Gunawardena, La Pointe, and Cooperrider. These scholars held a candle for me in my search through the transformative tunnel of learning and success toward my goal of receiving a Ph.D. The persistence topic of this study and the data collection process of appreciative inquiry and grounded theory analysis method reflect the progression I have made throughout my life of learning persistence and success. Using grounded theory for the analysis has been a huge leap and transition from someone who did not know what research was or value it seven years ago to being the creator of a theoretical model in the distance learning area.

Finally, during the data analysis for this study I was challenged by students and faculty to take more online courses when I was asked, what do I think of online learning. At that time, I had not had any really successful online learning experiences, so I said it was great for others and future workers but not really for me. But instead of leaving it there, I enrolled in an online Dreamweaver class paid for by Central New Mexico Community College. The class was just like the one the participants in this research study attended. It was very difficult for me because I had never taken a multimedia class, and I was working full-time and writing the dissertation.

Like the students interviewees, I was motivated by the desire to learn the class and still balance my responsibilities. Every time I reached a stumbling block, I said to myself, "You can't do this." I would stop; ask for help, or think of giving up. This behavior was unusual for me because I seldom think that, even about the statistics courses. However, I put in the effort, worked on my self-talk, and kept learning. Now I have successfully passed the class, with the help and encouragement of the online teacher. I was able to travel out of town twice during the class and still complete the work. The belief that I can create a Web Page through an online class experience has helped me become a transformed online learner and very curious about the future of distance learning and online learners. In addition, I identified with the older student in many of my assumptions about my own online learning process, and I can see how important successful online course experiences are to tranformative learning.

During the course of this research, I changed my viewpoint of online students from one of technically savvy people to goal-oriented, risk-taking learners. The online students were passionate about their desire for an education and a better lifestyle. The advisory committee student member offered me the most surprises because of her down-to-earth practical observations of how students might perceive and use this study's finding of The Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success Model. Discovering this model was the most exciting part of the research analysis because it actually fulfills my goal of a new appreciative-based paradigm for online course persistence.

I hope that by sharing my stories and researcher perspectives, the reader may identify any biases that might affect the analysis and findings and enhance their understanding of learning persistence and success for online learners.

*Provocative Proposals*

The following provocative proposals emerged from the grounded findings and this researcher's perceptions of what the interviewees wanted to convey about learning persistence and success. They have been alluded to in the preceding data and results and are supported by the advisory committee members, comprising online faculty, support staff, and online students. The provocative proposals are as follows:

1. Online persistence commences when learner motivations, values, and expectations, encounter access to online courses.

2. The opportunity for higher engaged learning in online classes is created when students' best practices of organization, interaction and responsibility intersect with faculty's best practices of timely interactions and flexible course structure.

3. Learning persistence and success increases for all students when the online course design includes mutigenerational and situation perspectives of the learners.

4. Continuous online learning persistence and success in online courses is transformational in that successful learners claim to have higher goals, increased confidence and more motivation.

5. Appreciative Inquiry interviews could positively impact student grades and persistence in the online class.

The assumptions underlying these provocative proposals are based on appreciative inquiry principles, social constructivist theory, chaos theory, and positive psychology.

*Assumptions*

- What we believe to be true and how we discover reality will affect the way we act and the results. The way we know is fateful (though this can have different meanings in different contexts).

- The anticipatory principle is that our image of the future guides current behavior and takes us in that direction.

- Distance learning is continually changing as we reach new understandings about the learners, knowledge, and technology.

- Change requires positive affect and social bonding to be innovative and effective.

- Humans move in the direction that they inquire about. Inquiry leads to empowerment.

- Learning persistence is a unique construct. It differs from persistence in that learning persistence is transformative.

The data supporting the first three provocative proposals have been shared in Research Questions One and Two. However, the fourth proposition about transformative learning and the fifth proposition about the affect of the appreciative interview on the students need further clarification and are discussed here.

*Proposal Four Online Learning Transformation*

Proposal four developed as a result of the vision or questions in the interview questions. This data produced a surprising finding that online learning could be

transformational. The students described how they have been and could be changed by successfully completing online classes. Each group reported some type of transformation. The younger students found themselves more responsible and organized. Older students described the feeling that they could learn anything. Parent students said there was now no limit to their educational goals. In general, they felt more confident that they could handle more online courses, and more than 90% did so the following term. In the parlance of higher education, persistence occurs when you complete a course and continue on to take another course. The following quote from a parent learner supports Provocative Proposal Four:

> #7: The reality that I can be an above-middle age student and that the availability of the course and flexibility helped me achieve this. I made it happen, I proved to myself that my possibilities and accomplishments are limitless. If I can pass this class, then I can most certainly pass another class with an A.

The skills developed as a result of online learning may transform the students into workers of the future, making them more valuable. The following quote shows the positive attitude and problem-solving skills online students develop, supporting Provocative Proposal Four:

> #17: I discovered that every online class has its own set of challenges. I'm proud to say that I've been able to meet all the others thus far, with the exception of a few. The classes have been challenging because I've had to figure out all of them on my own for the most part. You can't always wait for the instructor to respond to your question. That is one of the most challenging parts of learning online. I am

learning much more than I would from a traditional class setting, though. I have no choice but to explore all my options when I run into a challenge.

Some students find that the transformations are personal. They chose online classes because they were fearful of onsite class expectations. The following quote is from a student who made personal changes as a result of taking online classes also supports Provocative Proposal Four.

> #6:  I then made up my mind to give TVI a shot and try to get on with my life. So here we are almost three years later, and since I am able to take my time to complete assignments given, I am doing OK. My memory is returning and I don't have to write everything down anymore. I am starting to even relax a bit and not get so nuts if something isn't perfect. I am smiling again and am enjoying life and everything God sends my way.

The transformations are also attitudinal. The following quote shows how this student is growing and becoming very positive about learning online supports Provocative Proposal Four.

> #16:  It just started getting easier for me.  It gave me more for goal setting and stuff, because it's like being on your own in a lot of ways, especially verbally. You read it and whatever.  It started getting fun to where I wanted to do my work. You know like when you go play a game online or something and then the next day you want to see what's there.  It's just like a challenge.

In the following quote, a younger student describes her successes and how she feels as a result supports Provocative Proposal Four.

#15: I value the knowledge I am gaining. I love the feeling of accomplishment, and that motivates me to do more and do better. I feel like a successful student when I put to use what I have learned.

The quote from the next student shows how taking an online class raised her self-esteem:

#30: I feel proud of myself and empowered in my abilities.

These quotes are a testimony to the powerful transformations that occur and could occur if student and faculty best practices were always operational. It is possible to move toward that vision. If students and faculty were able to be successful once, it could happen all the time, which is the dream stage in an appreciative inquiry.

*Provocative Proposal Five*

The fifth provocative proposal – Appreciative inquiry interviews could positively impact student grades and persistence in the online class – arose out of the question at the proposal hearing about whether the inquiries are also interventions and if so could they have an impact on the students. This study found that of the 30 participating students 27 passed and continued on to another class or persisted, giving the participants a 90% persistence rate. The interviews may have generated self-reflection, which helped them to persist. The grades for the $n$=30 participants showed a mean grade 3.20 or B, standard deviation 1.13 and the mean grade for $n$=51 non-participants was 2.43 or a C with a standard deviation of 1.65. I conducted a one- sample t test using SPSS and found that $p = .00$ or significant difference. More information about this proposition is covered in Chapter V.

Finally, as part of this study, the five faculty teaching the research courses were interviewed. The findings from their appreciative inquiry responses support these provocative proposals.

*Overall Summary, Research Question Three*

In response to Research Question Three on provocative proposals, this section list five provocative proposals and elaborated on the Proposals Four and Five. These findings not only used the participants' data but also included how this researcher's background and assumptions are used as data.  The four following provocative proposals were presented:

1. Online learning persistence commences when learner motivations, values and expectations encounter access to online courses.

2. The opportunity for higher engaged learning in online classes is crated when students' best practices of organization interaction and responsibility intersect with faculty's best practices of timely interactions and flexible course structure.

3. Learning persistence and success increases for all students when the online course design includes mutigenerational and situation perspectives of the learners.

4. Continuous online learning persistence and success in online courses is transformational in that successful learn to have higher goals, increased confidence and more motivation.

5. Appreciative inquiry interviews could positively impact student grades and persistence in the online class.

This section explained and gave examples to support Provocative Proposal Four, regarding online learning as being transformational. It also provided quantitative data to support Proposal Five on the impact of the appreciative inquiry on student grades and persistence.  This researcher recognizes that the proposals may be innovative and provocative and looks forward to more discussion and research them.

Research Question Four: What Theory Explains Online Learning Persistence and Success?

This study's data and analysis provide not only the puzzle pieces to the question, "What theory explains the process of online learning persistence and success," but also the puzzle cover. Matching the findings of the categories, themes, and facts from an appreciative inquiry with the creative theory of Einstein's black hole formation in the universe helped create a powerful conceptual model of learning persistence and success in online learning. The model provides a symbolic overview of the process by which online learners are created and begin their learning journey, develop and learn, persist through difficulties, and continue, ultimately, to be transformed. The research findings support the proposal of a model of An Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success.

The number and variety of learning persistence and success variables collected from this researcher's appreciative inquiry of 30 online community college students' best practice stories can be conceptually described through the analogy of Einstein's theoretical model of the galactic formation of a black hole. In order to follow how each set of variables is similar to the elements of the analogy, this section will provide a brief summary of how a black hole forms and explain how the data findings fit into the

components of this graphic black hole model.  It will conclude with a graphic of the

conceptual model An Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and

Success.

*The Anatomy of a Black Hole*

- The black hole topic is about the interactions of matter and energy.

- Black holes result from a supernova explosion of massive stars and massive

  Active Galaxies.

- Black holes come in two sizes: "Stellar Mass" -- 5 to 20 times the mass of the

  sun -- and millions of times the mass of a sun that lies in the center of

  galaxies.

- Material swirls around a central black hole.

- Gas near the black hole heats up to UV and X-ray temperatures.

- This heats the surrounding gas, which glows in the optical.

- Gas flows according to a rotational motion from the orbit of a star and forms a

  disk surrounding a black hole.

- Gravity is a basic force of nature created between objects that have mass.

- Gravity, depicted by Einstein as a mesh or woven fabric, holds objects in their

  place and is the force that causes material to be pulled toward the black hole.

- Material in the disk gains energy as it falls into the black hole. Gravitational

  energy is converted to kinetic energy. Kinetic energy is then converted to heat

  and X-rays.

- Eventually a change from pulling to pushing occurs in the direction of the

  force and creates what is called a wormhole.

- The matter is pushed out of the wormhole with great force. That matter may be the precursor to a new active galaxy.

- Black hole formation has led people to look at the origin and evolution of the universe.

J. Lochner (NASA, GSFC), Black Holes from a Different Light.

*Research Finding of Online Learners*

The universe of online learners is composed of the intangible needs, wants, intentions, and aspirations of each individual learner. The persistence category, themes, and factors presented in the findings for Research Questions One and Two describe the subjective motivations, values, expectations, intentions, and dreams of the online learner. It is this researcher's belief that the online learner's subjective variables are analogous to gases in outer space. The learner's subjective intentions, desires, expectations, and values – like gases – are attracted to each other. When online learners discover the accessibility of the Internet's online learning capabilities, their intentions, desires, expectations, and values often connect and a burst of energy occurs, fueling their burning desires. The flame of desire to register for learning in online courses motivates them to register and to begin their learning journey. Like the burning balls of gases from newly created stars, new online learners bring to the learning environment, or the black hole, their unique life situation, generational perspectives, and personal motivations, desires, characteristics, expectations, and experiences. The unleashed energy from these subjective factors in discovering the accessibility to online courses may be what causes students to persist, a type of continuous combustion that the students call determination. The less available the options for learning are, the more the desire, and the greater the

level of determination. While many students talk about taking online courses as a choice or as a convenience, this often results from conflicting schedules or the students' preference to not be bothered by the onsite college environment and student influences. This researcher wonders whether these students may have less determination. What is clear from the data is that motivations, values, intentions, and expectations act as catalysts.

As the course starts, new learners discover what online courses are all about. They begin their learning journey supported by the gravitational structures of specific learning and success strategies, faculty attitudes, behaviors, and organization, and the structured design of the courses, based on the educational system's requirements. The findings from the data analysis show logical patterns that helped in creating the categories, themes, and factors of learning persistence and success presented in this study. It proposes that the universe of online learners' gravitational force -- with its pattern in a logically organized weave, composed of the online learner's success behaviors of organization and student-to-student interaction and characteristics of responsibility, faculty best practices of timely interaction and flexible organization, and the course's structural components -- makes up the fabric of success that affects online learners' determination.

In addition, the identified factors influencing persistence for online students strongly indicate that there are differences based on a student's age and life situation and that those differences could affect their level of determination and, ultimately, their learning and success. The community college student participants' multigenerational and situational voices – including younger, older/disabled, and Middle Age, parents and

single moms, military, and foreign born -- show uniquely different perceptions, motivations, and goals that influence their persistence. So the gravitational weave might be strengthened by the special voices of community college online students. Like colorful threads, these voices guide our understanding and meaning of persistence, learning, and success.

It is the researcher's contention that, when learners are implementing the success themes and factors and faculty are delivering the identified online learner best practices, a higher level of learning engagement may occur at that intersection. The study's findings show that when both students and faculty implement the interaction and organizational factors, learning and success are not only supported as gravity supports objects in the universe but also raised to a higher level.

Finally, like the tunnel that transforms matter in the wormhole of a black hole, students reported that after taking several online classes they were transformed, were more confident, had more self-determination, took more classes, had higher educational goals, and were more responsible and organized in their courses and life. This researcher proposes that they are transformed to confidently take on more courses. Many students reported that they had higher grades. This is what the researcher calls a transformative learning process. Through the vehicle of online courses and e-learning activities, learners could be transformed.

Furthermore, this researcher proposes that the transformed online learner may have the skills, abilities, and attitudes to serve as an exceptional workforce of the future. Research Question Three explains in more detail the data supporting the transformation. This new feature of online learning is included in the model because the research data

and the black hole model formation process point in that direction. The graphic model of
An Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learner Learning Persistence and Success is Figure
9 in this document.

## Summary

Chapter IV focused on themes or general trends, understandings and meanings,
theory and provocative proposals that emerged from the appreciative inquiry life stories,
the researcher's ideas, and other collected data.  The findings for each question have been
reviewed previously in the summary section for each question and Table 24 shows a brief
summary of the research questions and findings.

**Table 23**

*Research Questions and Findings*

| Research Questions | Findings |
| --- | --- |
| "What general themes emerge from an appreciative inquiry of online learning persistence and success with community college online students?" | Learning Category Themes: <br>     Faculty Effect <br>     Instructional Design <br>     Organizational System <br> Persistence Category Themes: <br>     Expectations/Perceptions <br>     Goals/Motivation <br>     Values <br> Success Category Themes: <br>     Student Behavior <br>     Personal Characteristics |

Table 23 Continued

| Research Questions | Findings |
|---|---|
| "What understanding or meaning emerges about learning persistence and success in online courses?" | Multigenerational Learner Groups |
| |     Younger (20-26) |
| |     Middle   (27-35) |
| |     Older   (36-60) |
| | Student Life Situation Groups |
| |     Parents |
| |     Foreign |
| |     Military |

Table 23 Continued

| Research Questions | Findings |
|---|---|
| "What provocative proposal of learning persistence and success in online courses emerges from the data?" | Five Propositions<br>1. Online learning persistence commences when the motivations, values and expectations encounter access to online courses.<br>2. The opportunity for higher engaged learning in online classes is created when students' best practices of organization, interaction and responsibility intersect with faculty's best practices of timely interactions and flexible course structure.<br>3. Learning persistence and success increases for all students when the online course design includes multigenerational and situational perspectives of the learners.<br>4. Continuous learning persistence and success in online courses is transformational in that successful learners claim to have higher goals, increased confidence and more motivation.<br>5. Appreciative inquiry interviews could positively affect student grades and persistence in the online class. |

Table 23 Continued

| Research Questions | Findings |
|---|---|
| "What theory explains online learning persistence and success?" | Model of An Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success |

The next and final Chapter V will provide a summary, conclusion, and recommendations based on the findings described in this chapter.

# CHAPTER V

# DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter V discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for the four research questions that framed this study. The questions are as follows:

- What general themes emerge from an appreciative inquiry of online learning persistence and success with community college online students?

- What understanding or meaning emerges about learning persistence and success in online courses?

- What provocative proposal of learning persistence and success in online courses emerges from the data?

- What theory explains online learning persistence and success?

This discussion chapter presents the study's implications, limitations, recommendations, and conclusions based on the key findings from each of the preceding questions. The method of grounded theory was used to answer the questions. This grounded theory content analysis used a "concept" as the unit of measurement. A concept is a complete thought or idea that can be expressed in a word, sentence or paragraph. The use of a concept as a unit of measurement follows the Stage Model of Qualitative *Analysis* (Berg, 2004, p. 286). In Chapter V, the findings from Chapter IV are considered as patterns in light of the relevant literature and theory to show where current theories or research converge with the findings and where they diverge or expand current theory. Chapter V offers an explanation of the findings' implications for the results and suggests ways the findings can be applied for desired results. The discussion of

implications pulls the theories and concepts into perspective for a clearer understanding of learning persistence and success.

<div align="center">Research Question One</div>

Research Question One: "What General Themes Emerge from an Appreciative Inquiry of Online Learning Persistence and Success with Community College Online Students?' primary findings show that three categories of learning, success, and persistence and eight underlying themes and factors had the most positive effect on learning persistence and success for online community college students. In the words of the students, persistence was defined as determination or "sticking with it;" it is influenced by the expectations, motivations, and values of the students as they connect with the accessibility of online courses. Success was defined as passing, and learning was defined as gaining new knowledge, memory, and application. Out of the 36 factors identified in this study, the following 8 factors were consistently found in the data:

Learning Factors

- Faculty interaction with students

- Social presence

- Organization

- Instructional course design/structure

Persistence Factors

- Responsibility for learning

Success Factors

- Effort

- Organization

- Student-to-student interaction

The faculty interaction factor from the learning category supports some of Tinto's (1998) integration theory's assumptions about retention. According to Kember (1989), establishing academic and social integration requires personal contact between students and faculty and staff in an educational institution.  Tinto says the goal is not retention; it is learning.  The type of faculty interaction that students and faculty described in this study involved responding to questions and guiding students' learning. It is important for faculty to take into account the positive effect that their daily online presence has for students' learning persistence and success. Increasing faculty interaction could enhance learning persistence. The manifestation of this factor would be faculty checking into the online course frequently, answering questions, and giving direction or observing students' progress.

Social presence findings were important as well. This study used an expanded interpretation of social presence theory.  The students' socializing was counted as social presence. This interpretation has implications for interaction, communication, and the social context of telecommunication-based distance education. According to Gunawardena (1994) and Daniel (1998) the online medium offers conversation or dialog and community, which create knowledge. The faculty interview data show that caring must be conveyed to the online students. The faculty posit that it is important to make connections with students either online or face-to-face.  One faculty interviewee said that he made an effort to watch his tone and language before writing to students online.  In addition, he checked in the online discussions three to four times a day.  Students noticed and appreciated when their questions were answered quickly. Encouraging educators to

go beyond just interacting with students online and to show caring could increase engagement and persistence in online classes. In addition, this finding suggests that by increasing the opportunities for social exchange – such as offering a place on the website for more informal communication – learning persistence and success may increase.

Faculty organization was a critical factor described in the findings. Participants described faculty organization as giving feedback, getting assignments back in a timely fashion, and letting the students know that they are aware of how the students are doing. Coldway (1986) similarly found that course characteristics such as turnaround time on papers and interaction with students positively affected retention in distance courses. In addition, he says that approaches to learning and personal support from teachers, counselors, and family members had more of an effect on course completion than academic factors.

The most challenging course design feature for students was team activities. Students requested monitoring assistance with team projects from faculty. They were most self-reflective about their online group interactions and struggled to grow toward team-playing competence. These factors suggest that ensuring that faculty are: organized, play a guidance role in team activities, and offer a clear, understandable course structure then there could be an increase in learning persistence and success for online students.

Aspects of this study's success factors of effort, organization, student-to-student interaction, and persistence factor, responsibility evolve from the following underlying psychological theories: attitude behavior, coping behavior, self-efficacy, and attribution, according to the retention model of Eaton & Bean (1995). These theories account for

social integration, institutional commitment, and departure decisions (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997).   Therefore the student success and persistence factors are supported by prior research that appears to be from a psychological framework.

The Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) model of psychological theories of retention suggests that as a student enters college with a complex array of personal characteristics and interacts with the institutional environment, several psychological processes occur that result in self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased efficacy, and internal locus of control to increase motivation.  This statement supports the connection between the major success factors found in this study. This demonstrates once again that integration is not the only model of retention. These findings suggest that by increasing faculty and student understanding of the student success themes of student characteristics and behaviors, learning persistence and success could be positively affected. Faculty might provide a variety of self-assessment opportunities and online communication features that build self-efficacy.

The student persistence factors of effort and organization are intertwined. Those that were most organized and talked about their high level of effort described themselves as independent learners. Garrison and Baynton (1987) used the concept of control to explain persistence in distance education courses.  They presented the concept of control in distance education by discussing independence as a characteristic helpful in distance learning persistence, and control as a way to talk about independence, power, and support. Anderson and Garrison (1998) expanded on control theory by discussing how learning in a networked world presents new activities, opportunities, and responsibilities for both the faculty and the learner.

Responsibility was another critical factor in this study. As students became oriented to online learning, they began to be critically reflective about the level of responsibility and effort it required (Mezirow, 2000). This critical reflection finding suggests that if students understood and took on the needed level of responsibility, and if they made the effort to be more organized, they could increase their potential for learning persistence and success. Therefore the responsibility factor could be enhanced through critical reflection activities. This is possible true of the other factors as well.

The theory of Herrmann (1988, p.9) – that the transformative process of learning is introduced to the institutional culture as "re-socialization," through which students make a transition from their identities as non-students to distance learning students – helps explain the contextual vision phenomenon found in the parent and foreign student groups. Some participants made the transition from their role as mother or foreigner to distance learning student by conceptually creating an image and acting "as if" they were in a classroom. In addition, some faculty participants described imaging that they were talking to the student, not to the computer. Both students and faculty used mental imagery in their online classes. This suggests that faculty and students could increase their awareness that some visualization could help students' transition from their present-moment setting into the online class, with its distance learning behaviors and characteristics. If faculty help students use the imagery or visualization factors when they are online, more students could possibly be successful and persistent.

Persistence, defined as determination, was found to be fueled by motivations, goals, and values, ignited by students' expectations of the opportunity to reach those intentions through online learning and propelled with effort, resulting in responsible

behaviors and attitudes. The attribution theory of Weiner (1986) does support the findings, in that the students' attributions regarding success are similar to their expectations that lead to persistence. The findings also suggest that the level of connection between student intentions or desires and their attributed possibility of reaching those intentions through online courses is what could increase the coping skills (Gibson, 1998) and the optimism (Seligman, 1990) necessary to persist. This suggests that increasing the number of online courses to meet the demands of students' goals could increase persistence and enrollment.

In summary, the analysis for Research Question One identified key past research that supports the findings from this study. The research data were supported by prior findings and expanded by the appreciative inquiry, which offered new understanding and meaning for the factors. Also included in the analysis for Research Question One was the way the findings can be used or understood in new ways.

<div align="center">Research Question Two</div>

Research Question Two was "What understanding or meaning emerges about learning persistence and success in online courses?" Learning persistence and success are not a "one size fits all" formula. The students' voices must be heard from a multigenerational and personal, situational level to truly identify and address students' needs. Different cultures experience instructional and motivational approaches in different ways; therefore, the educator of the future will have to identify and understand these cultural factors in designing online courses.

The findings from the students' appreciative inquiry provide a new understanding and meaning when we examine the factors of the online learners from a multigenerational

and a personal situational perspective, as described previously. Granger and Benke (1998) think that we must begin by looking at who the online students are. Online students often come from diverse backgrounds. Classrooms are becoming increasingly multicultural, and there is a critical need to pay attention to the diverse learning styles associated with various ethnic groups (Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998). These beliefs laid the foundation in this study for further exploration of the findings by age and personal life situations. These two authors and others believe that it is possible to provide guidelines for designing distance instruction and support to reflect the diversity of online learners. These findings offer insight into the development of these guidelines.

In this study, cultural differences are not restricted to groups from other countries. Differences also exist between different generations raised in the same country. Nickels et al. (1994) says that members of generations such as Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), and Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1994) are linked through shared life experiences in their formative years, usually the first 10 years of life.  What one learns and believes as a child affects how he or views risk and challenge, authority, teachers, technology, relationships, careers, and economics.

For the most part, Baby Boomers were raised in families with unprecedented economic prosperity, parents with secure jobs, and optimism about the future. Almost half of the students in this study were older students ages 36-60. The findings for the older students are supported by the preceding description, which influences their perceptions and behaviors. Their attitude toward their learning was optimistic, in that they saw a future personal and professional use of their new knowledge.

The Generation Xers were raised in dual-career families with parents who focused on work. As children, they attended day care or became latchkey kids. Their parents' successive layoffs added to their insecurity about having lifelong jobs. Their best asset is their ability to give feedback, especially positive feedback, and they expect more feedback themselves. This study split the Generation Xers into older 36-60 and Middle age group 27-35 because they self-identified into these groups, and the average college age turns out to be 28. Again, the preceding description supports the findings of the average student in Chapter IV.

The Generation Yers (20-26 age range) in this study are entering the professional workforce now. As a group, Generation Yers tend to share a number of common characteristics, especially the demand for feedback once or twice a year in performance reviews or elsewhere. They are considered impatient, skeptical, blunt, expressive, image driven, and inexperienced. The younger students in this study fit the Generation Yer's description of being adaptable, tech savvy, able to grasp new concepts, practiced at multitasking, efficient, and tolerant, with a sense of commitment (Nickels et al., 1994, pp. 320-322).

The identification of the unique needs of online learners by generation and life situation suggests that informed faculty could better prepare for and expand their interactions with students and curriculum structure accordingly. Moore (1996) says that distance educators need to be sensitive to the values that they transmit to students from other cultures. Gibson (2003) says that the most that can be expected is that the faculty and staff understand the multiple forces affecting our students and create sources for emotional support to the learners as they begin to act on their multiple contexts to reach

their learning goals. Social context can profoundly affect the success of the distance teaching-learning transaction, which in turn affects retention and persistence (Gibson, 1998).  Students perceived emotional support to be online interaction with the faculty.

One interview question was, "How do you know that a faculty person cares about you?" All groups responded by discussing the amount and quality of faculty-to-student interaction. This study found little expressed need for "support" other than faculty interaction.

The findings from the parent student group show that faculty interaction, organization, and course structure, and student effort, organization, responsibility, and student-to-student interaction had the most impact on their persistence.  Moore & Kearsley (1996) believe that these students must be able to manage and balance the different aspects of their lives in order to have time for studying. Role conflict, time management, family problems, and economic concerns can all present barriers to online learners. A student can easily feel overwhelmed.  The findings concerning parent students showed a high degree of concern that the faculty understand why these students are taking online classes.  Some expected the work to be easier online, and others shared uncertainties and anxiety.  These findings suggest that if parent students had a clear idea of the level and type of work required of them online, they would not underestimate the commitment required to complete a degree and would therefore properly anticipate the level of time and effort.

Educational institutions could provide more opportunities and preparation for the parent online learners. In addition, marketing online courses especially to the single moms and parents could increase their enrollment and ultimately their persistence.

The military students' greatest persistence factors were career and job motivation. They brought to their online courses good organizational skills, an understanding of responsibility, and a commitment to effort. The following researchers understand and generally support these factors. Fjortorft (1995) found that community college learners often return to school for career-related reasons. Their goal is to increase their earnings and gain a greater sense of career satisfaction. They are often unsure of their academic abilities and study skills (Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

This study is unique in that it identified the military students' need for online classes. None of the other groups were as focused on this motivational factor. This finding implies that course development that includes career information could increase military students' motivation, persistence, and success. Marketing to the military group could target their interest in career and employment.

The older students' online learning strengths appear to be found mostly in the persistence category and learning factors, according to the findings. They were strong in self-organization, responsibility, overcoming obstacles, and student-to-student interaction. However, their weakness appeared when they spoke about their expectations of faculty assistance. The older student had much lower expectation of faculty assistance than the other age groups. They did not come to their online course expecting any help from faculty online. Their greatest barrier was online team activities. Lynch (2001) Many students will consider themselves incapable of handling the computer requirements of online learning. However, contrary to popular belief, the older students in this study seldom mentioned technical barriers other than bandwidth. Their challenge was more concerned with isolation and feeling cut off from the social activity of learning (White &

Weight, 2000). Yet these older students lacked the skills to use the online communication feature. According to Pugliese (1995), persistent learners will discover ways to overcome or manage these barriers. Older students are very determined and responsible. These findings suggest that if there are clear instructions on how to find and use the interaction features in the online class, and if there is a moderator or mentor for team activities, the older student has the determination and personal characteristics to learn, persist, and succeed.

The Generation Yers' (or younger students') success factors are similar to the preceding groups, except that they had a greater need for flexibility, deadlines, and extra credit. They had greater expectations about faculty online interaction, and they needed help with personal organization and responsibility. Simonson et al. (2000) wrote that many students in their twenties have jobs and families. Generation Yers are uncertain about how they want to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. This uncertainty is manifested in their online experiences. They want to multitask, to "have it all" at one time, yet are challenged by the level of organization and responsibility required in online classes. They face role conflict, as Garland (1994) describes the conflict between being a student and a young adult. They desire respect and personal control, as manifested in their need for flexibility and extra credit; on the other hand, they seek help from faculty and other students. These findings suggest that younger students require more attention and follow-up than the other ages in order to be persistent. In addition, they need to be recognized for their level of effort and responsibility. Finally, faculty need to understand that engaging younger online students will not be easy. They may complete the minimum required and appear to not have the interest or skills, when other factors are

actually influencing their level of engagement. More research is needed on engaging the younger person in online learning.

In summary, the understanding and meaning found in this study show that it is insufficient to know what experiences students have or are having; one must also know what those experiences mean to the students before judging their abilities and decision making and developing the necessary intervention to support them. Online learning is not "one-size fits all"; there is a wide range of differences in online learners.

Research Question Three

Research Question Three is "What Provocative Proposal of Learning Persistence and Success in Online Courses Emerges from the Data?" The researcher believes that new constructs about the reasons to persist and the nature of persistence are introduced and revisited during the learning process. The sociocultural theories of Vygotsky (1978) indicate that the tools of learning that include language and thought have embedded in them values, ways of focusing, ways of determining what is irrelevant, and ways of knowing. Values and beliefs are challenged and modified, based on the level of social construction of meaning, possibly from lower to higher levels.

The researcher identifies a "story line" and writes a story that integrates the categories in the model (Creswell, 1998). In this research phase, provocative proposals are typically presented. The provocative proposals that arose out of the grounded theory analysis in this study are presented in the following paragraphs. They show plausible relationships among concepts and sets of concepts. Some proposals are challenging, some show a shift in paradigm and others simply refocus what is known. All are based on the social construction of meaning from the perspective of the participant and the researcher.

*Provocative Proposal One*

*Online persistence commences when learner motivations, values, and expectations, encounter access to online courses.*

This set of concepts emerges from social construction and image theory, which suggests that the images we hold of the future influence the decisions we make and the actions we take in the present. AI's unique focus on stories and images of the future, and the resulting collective image held by a group, is one of the most untapped resources for organizational change (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). This study's provocative proposal suggests the following:

a. The images of prospective online learners can come to fruition when the learners discover the availability of online courses and decide to enroll.

b. Online learners' dreams individually and collectively drive them toward continual persistence.

c. Tapping into the learner's images can influence the organizational change of increased course persistence in online classes.

In addition, the AI anticipatory principle, "images inspire action," says that human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. Whitney & Trosten-Bloom (2003) posit that the more positive and hopeful is the image of the future, the more positive is the present-day action. Furthermore, the faculty and student interview data support the social construction theory through the faculty and students' stories of visualizing their online course as if they were in a face-to-face course and talking to a person instead of a computer.

Therefore, this researcher suggests that faculty provide opportunities for learners to express and reveal their dreams and even help create collective images of their desires. By allowing and even requiring reflection time and group discussion, faculty will draw on the power of online students' dreams and increase the possibility of their persistence. In addition, by marketing online courses to targeted groups, increased enrollment and ultimately learning persistence and success will occur.

*Provocative Proposal Two*

*The opportunity for higher engaged learning in online classes is created when students' best practices of organization, interaction and responsibility intersect with faculty's best practices of timely interactions and flexible course structure.*

"Learning" in the construct of learning persistence and success in this study is defined as a socially situated cognitive function developed through the process of intra-psychological interaction within oneself and inter-psychological interaction with others to create meanings and new knowledge (Vygotski, 1978). Students' definition of learning from this study is somewhat less social, in that they define learning as gaining new knowledge, memory, and application. The student data in this study identify student-to-student and faculty interaction as the type of interactions that students perceive to be helpful for their learning. The more there was exchange of conversation, the more learning was recognized as a social activity (Phillips, 1998, p.11). This is identified as social presence in this study.

Faculty interview data show that student-to-student, faculty-to-student, and student-to-content interactions positively affect learning. An interview question for faculty and students about engagement in learning was used as an effective indicator for

learning, as opposed to a cognitive base indicator. This suggests that when faculty and students focus more on the types and levels of interaction in the online class, greater engagement in learning can occur.

Whitney & Trosten-Bloom (2003) describe the AI principle of free choice, which states that people perform better and are more committed when they have freedom to choose how and what they contribute. Free choice, or flexibility, was a fundamental success factor in this study. Faculty perceive flexibility as one of the most valuable aspects of online classes. This provocative proposal suggests that when flexibility in course structure is offered, it can enhance student-learning engagement. Further research is needed into this factor and the other factors in this provocative proposal.

*Provocative Proposal Three*

*Learning persistence and success increases for all students when the online course design includes mutigenerational and situation perspectives of the learners.*

Socially constructed reality and social constructionism posit that human communication is the central process (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Through discourse methodology, a discourse tool (Braxton et al., 1997), one can uncover group identities and culturally determined mechanisms for creating meaning from experiences and sharing those meanings. Rather than focus on the attributes of persisting students, one can attend to the process of persistence by focusing on culture, cognition, and the structure of meaning shown in discourse (Attinasi, 1989, 1994; Tierney, 1992). Therefore, this provocative proposal, developed out of discourse, focused on culture and how meaning supports the possibility that the socially constructed reality of multigenerational and situational students may influence their persistence. When faculty

increase their awareness of the diverse realities of our online students and expand their curriculum to accommodate these students' styles, more students may persist in taking online classes.

*Provocative Proposal Four*

*Continuous online learning persistence and success in online courses is transformational in that successful learners claim to have higher goals, increased confidence and more motivation.*

AI's theoretical basis in social constructionism and constructionism holds that social interaction is the key process that transforms realities. Constructivism and constructionism theories underlie this study and the assumption that meaning exists within us rather than in external forms. Meaning is constructed from knowledge.

Transformative learning theories support this provocative proposal of transformational learning in online classes. The findings showed that through online interaction and learning, the students went beyond gaining just factual knowledge and were changed in some meaningful ways by how they learned in the online courses, as described in Chapter IV. Mezirow (2000) suggests that individuals can be transformed through a process called critical reflection, in his theory of transformative learning. The catalysts for transformative learning are "disorienting dilemmas," situations that do not fit one's preconceived notions. These dilemmas prompt critical reflection and the development of new ways of interpreting experiences. Less dramatic predicaments, such as those created by a teacher and/or online course, also promote transformation. Transformative learning involves reflectively transforming the beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions that constitute our meaning schemes. Mezirow (1981)

believes that this happens through a series of phases that begin with a disorienting dilemma and pass through several other phases, ending in integration of the new perspective into the person's life.

This provocative proposal posits that continual successes in online classes are like phases students go through to gain their new positive perspective of themselves and their possibilities. As with transformative learning, this provocative proposal is an elusive concept that is difficult to define. It was a new and unexpected divergent concept that emerged from the data and was not included in the literature review. This provocative proposal suggests that when the goal is to foster an online learning environment, this is transformational. The educator could consider establishing an environment that builds trust and care, and that facilitates the relationship or connection among learners. The teacher could serve as a role model by being willing to learn and change. Two of the faculty interviewed described this behavior. Finally, teachers need to consider how they can help students use feelings and emotions for reflective learning.

According to Mezirow, the role of the educator is to:

- Help learners focus on and examine the assumptions that underlie their beliefs, feelings, and actions,

- Assess the consequences of these assumptions, and

- Test the validity of assumptions by participating in reflective dialog.

When students become more reflective, more open, and more accepting of the perspectives of others in online classes and more successful in their knowledge pursuits, online transformational learning can occur.

Finally, the provocative proposal includes the statement that the online learning experience may create workers of the future. These workers would have the following skills and abilities: technical skills, confidence about learning online, organization and time management, multitasking, teamwork skills, and the ability to explore resources online, visualize situations outside their current environment, assess others' styles and needs, and communicate with sensitivity to others' perspectives. Understanding the motivational forces in global organizations and building effective global teams is still new territory for most companies. Developing group leaders who are culturally astute, flexible, and able to deal with ambiguity is a challenge businesses face in the 21st century (Williams et al., 2004). According to the *Office of the Future: 2020*, six skills will be needed to prepare for success in a future of increasing ability to work from anywhere: analysis with good judgment, collaboration and team building, technical aptitude of selection and effective use of tools, intuition and adapting to the needs and work styles of others, ongoing education, and negotiation to produce positive results. This supports the topic of creating employees of the future. By helping students to be successful and to persist in online classes, educational institutions will help the community have workers of the future.

*Provocative Proposal Five*

*Appreciative inquiry interviews could positively affect student grades and persistence in the online class.*

The AI principle of Simultaneity in Practice posits that inquiry is intervention. Human systems and people move in the direction of what they study and inquire into.

The moment that we ask a question, we begin to create change. This provocative proposal

arose out of the assumption that the inquiries are interventions and may have an impact.

This study found that, of the 30 students studied, 27 passed and continued on to

another class (or persisted), giving the participants a 90% persistence rate.  In addition,

the grades of the participants (or treatment group and the grades of the non-participants

(or control group) from the online classes studied were collected. The letter grades were

converted to points with the following equivalency formula: A=4.0, B=3.0, C=2.0,

D=1.0, and F=0.  The grades for the 30 participants showed a mean grade of 3.20 or B,

with a standard deviation of 1.13. The mean grade for the 51 non-participants was 2.43 or

C, with a standard deviation of 1.65.  A one-sample t test using SPSS was conducted; the

result was that p = .00 or significant difference. There was a difference and the mean

difference for the treatment group was 3.2 and for the control group was 2.4.

In summary, the data show that the treatment of an appreciative inquiry suggests

that there was a positive difference in grades and persistence. Refer to the appendix for

the data and SPSS report. This suggests that when educators ask positive questions of

learners about learning persistence and success, they could increase grades and

persistence.

<div align="center">Research Question Four</div>

Research Question Four is "What theory explains online learning persistence and

success?"  The research findings support the proposal of model of An Appreciative

Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success.  This model provides not only the

puzzle pieces to the question, what theory explains the process of online learning

persistence and success, but also the puzzle cover-like model of a new paradigm for

online persistence. A theory is a plausible relationship among concepts and sets of concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Morrow & Smith (1995) say a theory may be articulated at the end of the study and can assume the form of a visual picture. I have chosen the graphic model to visually demonstrate the grounded theory of online persistence.
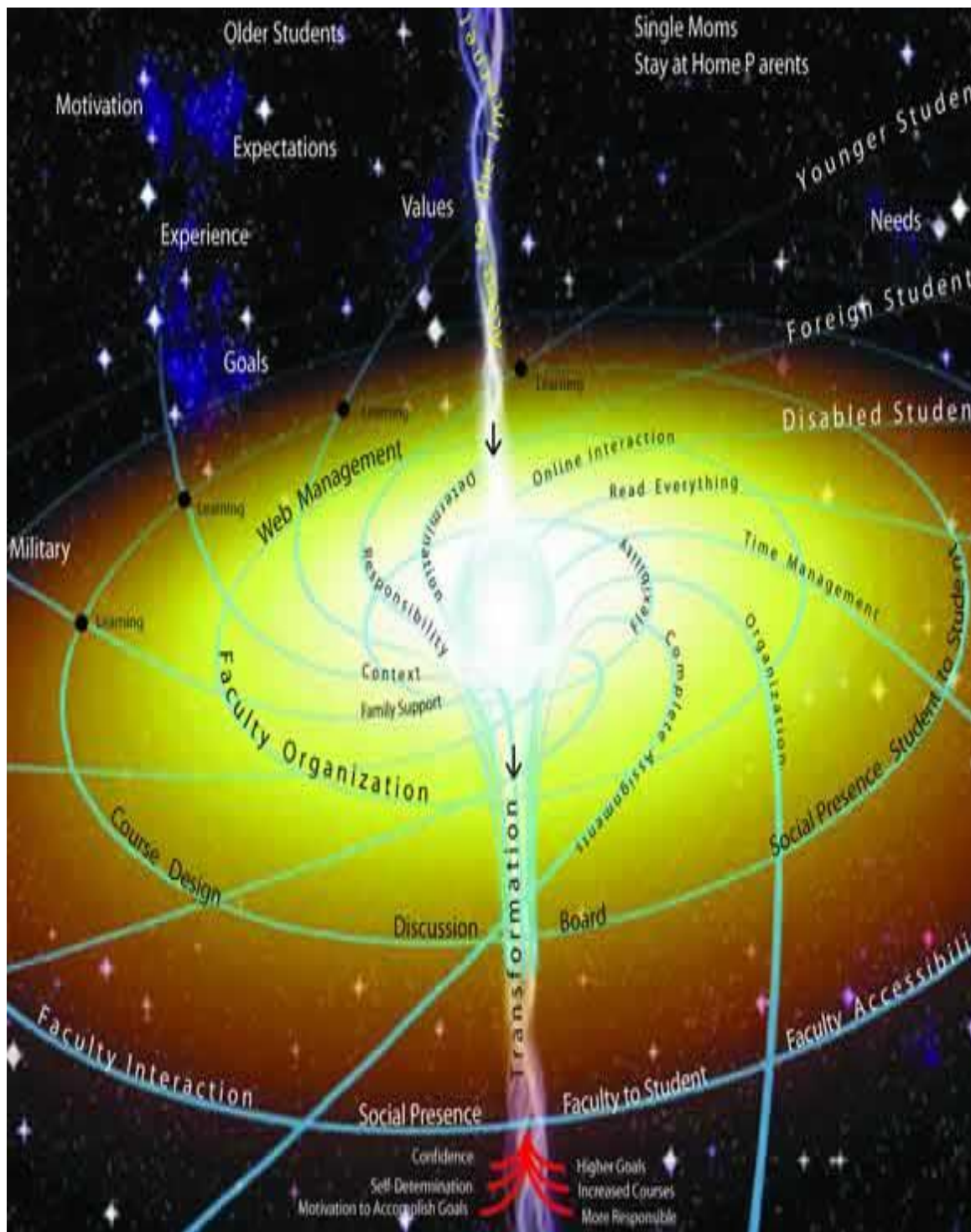
Graphic by Bergman, Sky & Craft Magazine

*Figure 9.* **An Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success**

**Model.**

The purpose of this study was to use grounded theory and AI data to create a theory that serves as a change agent for increased learning persistence and success.  The works of Reason, (1988) described the development of a new research paradigm and method that involves a closer relationship between the researcher and the researched through inquiry. They believe that the New Paradigm Research creates the world to be studied, helps people flourish, increases self-determination, and increases the quest for knowledge, which can be used in life and result in knowledge.  Patton (2003) believes that the paradigm underlying AI is an approach that leads to organizational learning and creating. This researcher believes this model is a new paradigm for online learning persistence and success leading to the development of new perspectives and understanding.

Member-checking activities revealed that faculty were excited about the model and thought it would be very useful as an introduction to online learning for prospective online faculty and students. In addition, the online students were excited, motivated, and comforted by the model. One student advisory committee member said that she was more confident about taking online classes, now that she knew that faculty knew what their role is. She could concentrate on her role and not worry about what the instructor was going to do.  This new vision is one that graphically shows the teacher's role in basic ways, reducing the lecture style by increasing interaction opportunities, increasing the focus on sensitivity to or caring about individual students' problems and achievements, and shifting the way in which online courses are laid out, evaluation is conducted, and teachers can expand their curricula to reach the different learning styles of a variety of students.

This study's theoretical model, which arose out of this research, provides an exciting, understandable, metaphoric overall explanation of online learning and persistence and success and a new AI paradigm of persistence. By sharing with faculty and students The Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success Model, educators could create new knowledge and organizational learning about online persistence. The integration of online persistence factors and the new AI paradigm could result in shifts in both teaching style and the vision of online classrooms and student learning styles and visions of possibilities resulting in transformative learning.

## Summary of Chapter V

This chapter presented an analysis of the key findings for each of the four research questions. The findings from Chapter Four were discussed in light of relevant related literature and theory. The links to theory or research offered support and an explanation of the findings.

The study's learning theme with key factors of faculty interaction with students, social presence, organization, and course design structure support existing theories of interaction and social presence. In addition, these factors offer more supporting data on the relationship learning engagement and faculty interaction to student persistence. The success theme with its key factors of effort, and organization clearly puts the onus on the student's level of commitment and time management. Finally, the success theme's factor of student-to-student interaction is an important finding for students to discover. Students and faculty need to know that student-to-student interaction clearly has a positive impact on success. If more students and faculty understand the importance of online peer communication and how to better communicate, students would discover a new vista of

support and success.  Finally, the persistence theme with its major factor of responsibility and definition of determination offered learners a bottom line ingredient for success and offered new perspectives for faculty.

The multigenerational and situational persistence factors from the learning category offered meaning, understanding and clarity to the proposed construct of learning persistence and success.  Educators now have a better understanding of the variety of student needs by age and life situation so that they can improve their instructional designs.  This study confirms that online learning is not "one-size fits all." There are differences in online learner' persistence needs which must be addressed in order to improve learning and retention. Other studies on persistence in distance learning have looked at the factors of gender and educational background education that have been identified as having an influence on persistence in online courses. This study's findings go beyond gender and educational background to find that age and life situation also has influences on learner persistence.

The five provocative proposals described below have implications for not only faculty and students in the field of online learning but for organizations seeking to promote and provide quality distance learning.

1. Online learning persistence -- with its properties of being intentional, personal, subjective, volatile, or changeable, and its variables of motivations, values, and expectations -- commences when there is accessibility to online courses.

2. The simultaneous combination of the student's utilization of organizational and interaction skills and responsibility characteristics and the faculty's

implementation of timely interactions and flexible course structure creates the

opportunity for higher learning in online classes.

3. Structuring online courses to engage the multigenerational and situational

   perspectives of the online learners will increase learning persistence and

   success for all students.

4. Continuous learning persistence and success in online courses will transform

   the learners and create employees of the future.

5. Appreciative inquiry interviews could positively impact student grades and

   persistence in the online class.

The most significant finding of this study for both faculty and learners is a new

theoretical model, An Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and

Success. It offers a comprehensive picture of online learning from the learners'

beginning desire for a flexible learning opportunity to the ending product of a

transformed learner.

Implications for Online Course Designers, Instructors, and Learners

The study brought forth learning persistence and success concepts and factors,

which are examined further, for practical application. The implications for designers,

instructors and students are listed below.

*Designers*

- Ensure that faculty are: organized, play a guidance role in team activities, and

  offer a clear, understandable course structure for learning persistence to occur.

- Include an e-mentor or coach in the online team or group and increase learner

  success and satisfaction with online team activities.

- Offer the online courses and they will come.

- Target and market online courses to single moms, and parents.

- Prepare parent online learners for the online experience by sharing the Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success Model.

- Market online courses to targeted groups of online learners to increase enrollment.

- Show the learners they are capable of success and they will be successful.

- Design online courses for learner success and the learners will be transformed.

- Offer transformational online learning opportunities, as successful learners will increase.

- Offer user-friendly screens and learners will find it easier and more fun to navigate the online course to be a successful learner.

- Use student conversational language when giving instructions and information.

- Have few onsite face-to-face requirements. Onsite locations need to be easily accessible and consistent.

*Instructors*

- Use an e-mentor or coach in the online team or group and increase learner success and satisfaction with online team activities.

- Be organized, oversee and guide the team's activities.

- Use a moderator for each online team or group to coordinate the activities.

- Give feedback and assignments back in a timely fashion.

- Let students know you are aware of how the student's are doing.

- Offer opportunities for self-reflection about the online experience

- Design group activities in a way that prepares the learner for team activities.

- Provide self-assessment opportunities and online communication features that build self-efficacy by using an appreciative inquiry approach. Ask positive questions for example: Ask students to identify times they were successful learners and what it took. Ask them to identify their strengths as learners.

- Use imagery as a tool for online learners to situate themselves and to promote family understanding and support of their online learning needs. Tapping into the learner's images can increase course persistence in online classes.

- Ask students to visualize or dream of being successful in the course and to identify what it would take to reach their vision. This will build self-identity as a learner.

- Be aware of learning persistence and success factors especially student success characteristics and behaviors such as organization, determination and responsibility level.

- Add reflective experiences and activities look at challenges and successes. Ask them to record what they thought or felt.

- Take a pro-active approach to student success. Be positive and acknowledge the quality of assignments within a short time frame, preferable in a day.

- Be flexible with assignments and deadlines. Limit the number of timed tests.

- Show caring by checking in online daily and recognizing the students individually.

- Offer younger students more attention and follow-up to increase persistence.

- Recognize student's level of effort and responsibility.

- Understand and acknowledge that online learning is not easy.

- Offer opportunities for student-to-student, faculty-to-student and student-to-content interactions and focus on the types and levels of interaction to increase engagement.

- Be aware of the diverse realities of online learners and expand the curriculum to accommodate students' needs by age and life situations.

- Be cognizant of learner motivations and needs.

*Learners*

- Explore what is required for online course success.

- Assess you life situation to determine if you can handle the level of responsibility.

- Take responsibility for your success by completing the assignments as directed and asking questions when needed.

- Log in daily and participate in any discussion and group activities as required. Know that interacting with the instructor, and classmates increases your learning.

- Introduce yourself sufficiently for others to get to know you and feel comfortable interacting with you.

- Imagine yourself in an onsite class when you are on the computer. Act as if you were in an onsite class by designating a special study place.

- Notify those around you of your need for uninterrupted time and space.

- Put in the effort required to be successful and remind yourself of why you are taking this course.

- Identify your strengths as an online learner and apply those to the online course requirements.

- Keep in contact with the instructor, follow instructions and ask questions.

- Expect there will be a time delay between your question and the instructor or classmates' response.

- Reflect on your progress, challenges, and acknowledge your online successes.

- Be open and accepting to others perspectives in the online class.

- Help other online students' in your class if they are lost.

- Be determined to have successes in the online class. Know that determination is the key to learning persistence and success in online classes.

- Take more online classes and define yourself as a successful online learner.

<center>Limitations</center>

The limitations of the study's results are in the area of population, methods, some student's inability to answer some questions and scope of the study. The population of 30 business community college appreciative inquiry participants may not capture the perceptions of the other groups of online learners, such as four-year college students, students from other disciplines, and the private sector. The study included 30 participants from 5 different classes when only 25 were originally required. This study did show sufficient evidence of differences in responses to warrant further research.

The combination of appreciative inquiry data collection and grounded theory analysis had few research precedents. AI in this study was more of an approach than a

method because it used grounded theory for analysis. Combining AI style interview questions with grounded theory questions required the researcher to make some modifications in the interview questions. Though these modifications proved very beneficial to the study, a theoretical sample would have been a better fit, for the grounded theory analysis has positive oriented questions while grounded theory interviews are more unbiased and open-ended questions.

AI was chosen to focus the study on online learning persistence and success best practices and to move the theory toward the language and image of success. Sometimes the participants appeared unsure of how they wanted to answer and they told another important story that did not relate to the question. Their answers were within the topic and did not appear to significantly impact the study. This speaks to the need for more research on the application of AI questions to grounded theory questions.

In addition, the students had some negative experiences to describe regarding teams, organization, and teacher behaviors, which were included in the coding as negative responses. The scope of this research was broadly persistence factors, so how the students overcame their obstacles and their recommendations were included as of secondary importance. In addition, little follow-up was done with the students who failed the class.

Data were available on persistence of the participants, but only two of the classes had persistence data on the non-participants because of a difference in their gradebooks.

In summary, since this was an exploratory qualitative study, the results cannot be generalized. Although the preceding limitations may affect the understandability and

utility of the findings, the study does offer a theoretical model and new understandings of persistence in online classes. Further research is needed.

<div style="text-align:center">Recommendations</div>

The researcher's recommendations are that further research qualitative nature be conducted on the five provocative proposals listed previously. Because the findings came out of a study of 30 participants in community college business courses, they cannot be generalized to different programs of study or types of higher education. They are grounded in the voices of a particular group of individuals and the context. Therefore, research with four-year college students, private-sector trainees, and international students is recommended. Further study on the military and foreign online learner is especially recommended. The number of these students is likely to increase, especially if we have more information on how to accommodate their learning needs.

The challenge of online teambuilding and group assignments for learners requires further study. Researchers need to explore the online learning models of mentoring and coaching as a possible tool to support teams. A study of the online team support models from other countries like the UK, Sri Lanka, India, Korea, and China – and how their online mentoring models could apply to the U.S. online model are needed. The findings showed that the online students could be from any location, situation or age group. Further research into the types of marketing strategies that would best reach the single parent, military, younger, and older prospective online learner is also recommended.

Transformative online learning, which was discovered in the grounded theory analysis, requires further study into the ways in which online learning is a disorienting dilemma, the phases and factors affecting the transformation, and the types of

transformation that occur.  Researchers interested in both online learning and transformative learning might provide more insight into a body of knowledge on transformative online learning.

Research is also needed in the area of continuous online learning creation of future workers. Are we preparing our learners for the jobs of the future, which may be more technical and project oriented?

The construct of learning persistence as a subset of persistence in general needs to be studied further. Do the factors that relate to learning persistence help differentiate it in an understandable and useful manner? In addition, further research into the use of appreciative inquiry for data collection and as a method of analysis would help pave the way for those who want their research studies to not only contribute to the body of knowledge in their field but also to serve as an intervention for positive change.

AI as a research method has some limitations. It was difficult to craft grounded theory research questions for data collection that were only positively focused. If the questions only asked positive questions, they were leading the participants without giving them any other options. This study's original research questions had to be revised to leave the opportunity for participants that could not identify any positive responses to be able to offer a response. The final questions were created to maintain and the tone and goal of an appreciative inquiry while offering the opportunity for problem-focused responses. In light of these changes, AI was used as an approach to grounded theory rather than as a method.  A recommendation for future researchers using AI and Grounded Theory is to first study the ways AI and Grounded Theory have been used successfully.  There is little research on the applicability of AI to Grounded Theory.

Therefore a study needs to be conducted to clarify the relationship between AI and Grounded Theory.

More research on the model An Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success is needed, in order to: 1) identify whether and how the model offers a new and useful paradigm of online learning, 2) whether it has an effect on educator's and student's understanding of online learning and 3) whether the model effects educator behavior and attitude and student attitude and behavior for greater engagement in learning. Ultimately, a research question would be whether the model would increase learning persistence and success in online learners.

Guidelines are needed to address the multigenerational and situational needs of online students. The guidelines may come from psychological, sociological, and educational disciplines. One suggestion is further study of Resiliency Theory. Siebert (1996) offers coping skill development and problem resolution processes. Faculty may refer to the Emotional Intelligence Theory of Gardner (1993) to address the variety of learning styles. Finally, the Attribution Theory of Weiner (1986) and the Optimism Theory of Seligman (1990) may provide some additional insight into ways faculty can show their positive intentions for the students. Like the guidelines in Burge (1998) and Von Prunner (1999), address key issues for women, such as participation, curricula, barriers, and technological application based on constructivist theory, this study provides the foundational factors and some guidelines for older, younger, average, parent, military, and foreign students.

Conclusion

This qualitative exploratory research based on constructivism, social constructionism, sociology, and positive psychology perspectives sought to identify themes, increase our understanding, create provocative proposals, and provide a theory of online learning persistence and success.

Table 24 provides a summary of research questions and findings.

**Table 24**

*Summary of Research Questions and Findings*

| Research Questions | Findings |
|---|---|
| "What general themes emerge from an appreciative inquiry of online learning persistence and success with community college online students?" | Learning Category Themes: <br>     Faculty Effect <br>     Instructional Design <br>     Organizational System <br> Persistence Category Themes: <br>     Expectations/Perceptions <br>     Goals/Motivation <br>     Values <br> Success Category Themes: <br>     Student Behavior <br>     Personal Characteristics |

Table 24 Continued

| Research Questions | Findings |
|---|---|
| "What understanding or meaning emerges about learning persistence and success in online courses?" | <u>Multigenerational Learner Groups</u><br>  Younger (20-26)<br>  Middle  (27-35)<br>  Older   (36-60)<br><u>Student Life Situation Groups</u><br>  Parents<br>  Foreign<br>  Military |

Table 24 Continued

| Research Questions | Findings |
|---|---|
| "What provocative proposal of learning persistence and success in online courses emerges from the data?" | Five Propositions<br>1. Online persistence commences when learner motivations, values and expectations encounter access to online courses.<br>2. The opportunity for higher engaged learning in online classes is created when students' best practices of organization, interaction and responsibility intersect with faculty's best practices of timely interactions and flexible course structure.<br>3. Learning persistence and success increases for all students when the online course design includes multigenerational and situational perspectives of the learners.<br>4. Continuous learning persistence and success in online courses is transformational in that successful learners claim to have higher goals, increased confidence and more motivation.<br>5. Appreciative inquiry interviews could positively affect student grades and persistence in the online class. |

Table 24 Continued

| Research Questions | Findings |
|---|---|
| "What theory explains online learning persistence and success?" | Model of An Appreciative Paradigm of Online Learning Persistence and Success |

Table 24 shows the research questions and findings. It identifies the 8 best practice themes, lists new multigenerational and situational perspectives for online learning persistence, describes the 5 provocative proposals of what concepts are helpful for online learning persistence and success and names the powerful model of an Appreciative Paradigm for Online Learning Persistence and Success that expands our understanding of online learning and provides the keys to success to the universe of online learners.

As a result of this study's themes, new understandings, propositions and theoretical model the field of distance learning has some new tools based on the best experiences of online learners. This study's contributions to the field of online learning provide guidance to designers, instructors, organizational systems and online students. Most importantly, the study provides an exciting image of an appreciative paradigm of learning persistence and success so that all can see what is needed for a successful transformative online learning experience.

**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A:**

**Glossary Appreciative Inquiry**

Table 1

A.

Affirmative topic choice:  The topics identified in the Discovery phase that guide the formation of the interview guide.  It is a positive descriptive phase representing the organization's focus for change.

Anticipatory learning:  A fundamental principle that says our positive images of the future lead our positive actions. This is the increasingly energizing basis and presumption of Appreciative Inquiry.

Appreciate: A verb that means, "to value something." It's the act of recognizing the best in the people of the world around us; affirming the past and present strengths, successes and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality and excellence) to living systems.  It also means to increase in value.

Appreciative Inquiry:  The cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them.  It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system "life" when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.

Appreciative interview:  An interview that uncovers what gives life to an organization, department, or community when at its best.

Appreciative learning culture:  An organizational culture that fosters and develops the following competencies to create an appreciative learning system:  affirmative, expansive, generative and collaborative competencies.

Appreciative paradigm:  A unique perspective of the organizational world that views organizations as mysteries to be embraced.

C.

Capacity building:  A relational process that builds an organization's future to pursue its vision, mission and goals and sustain its existence. This process pushes boundaries to develop and strengthen an organization and its people.

Co-construct or co-create:  A term used to describe a collaborative construction of the organization's future state. It is developed out of social construction theory, which states human systems create their social reality by the words they speak.

Core competencies:  These are the value capabilities that assist the organization in crating strength bases relative to key competition.

Constructivist principle:  A fundamental principle and belief in Appreciative Inquiry that human knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven. To be effective, organizations must be understood as human constructs.

D.

Deficit-based approach to problem solving:  It begins with seeking out the problem, the weak link in the system.  Then, diagnosis and alternative solutions are recommended. Appreciative inquiry challenges this traditional paradigm with an "affirmative" appreoach to embrace organizations challenges in a positive light.

Design:  This is phase three of the 4-D model in which participants create the provocative proposition b determining the ideal, "how can it be?" The organization's future is co-constructed.

Destiny:  This is the phase four of the 4-D model in which the participants continue to co-construct the their preferred future by defining, "what will it be?" Stakeholders begin the planning and implementation process to bring the dreams that have been designed to life.

Discovery:  This phase one of the 4-D model where participants inquire into the life-giving forces of the organization to begin to understand and build their positive core. Participants uncover and value the best of "what is?"   This information is generated through the engaging appreciative interviews.

Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny: 4-D cycle- This model displays the Appreciative Inquiry approach in four phases that is designed meet the unique challenges of eh organization and its industry.

Dream:  This is phase two of the 4-D model where participants dialogue and crate the dream for the organization. A collective vision is defined as to "What might be?"

F.

Fateful:  The words we choose and the questions we ask determine the events and answers we find.

G.

Generative learning:  The type of organizational learning that emphasizes continuous experimentation, systematic thinking and a willingness to think outside the limits of an issue.

H.

Heliotropic:  A term that implies that people have an observable and largely automatic tendency to move in the direction of affirming images of the future.

I.

Inner dialogue:  A term used to describe the conversation that goes on within the mind of a person and within the collective mind of the organization.  An organization's inner dialogue can typically b ascertained by listening to the informal communication channels within the organization.

Inquiry:  A verb that describes the act of exploration and discovery.  It also refers to the act of asking questions and being open to seeing new potentials and possibilities. Synonyms:  discovery search, study and systematic exploration.

Interview guide:  The primary data collection tool used during the Discovery phase of Appreciative Inquiry. Interview questions are determined based on the affirmative topic choice. These questions are open-ended and designed to elicit rich storytelling from the interviewee. It is also called the interview protocol.

L.

Life-giving forces:  those elements of experiences within the organization's past and or present that represent the organization's strengths when it is operating at its very best. A life-giving force could be a single moment in time, such as a particular customer transaction, or it could be large in scope.  It can be any aspect or that contributes to the organizations highest points and most valued experiences or characteristics

M.

Metaphor:  This is an element or a figure of speech in which an expression is used to refer to something that denotes a suggested similarity.  In Appreciative Inquiry, metaphors are used because they have the power to facilitate "meaning-making" and generate a better understanding with the mind of the receiver and listener.

P.

Poetic principle:  A fundamental principle and belief in the Appreciative Inquiry approach that says human organizations are like open books.  The story of the system is constantly being co-authored and it is open to infinite presentations.

Positive core:  This is what makes up the best of an organization and its people.

Positive image-positive action:  An Appreciative Inquiry theory that posits that the more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present day action.

Problem-solving paradigm: A fundamental perspective that views organizations as problems to be solved.

Provocative propositions: Statements that bridge the best of "what is" with the organization's vision of "what might be." It becomes a written articulation of the organization's desired future state that is written in the present tense to guide the planning and operations in the future. Also know as possibility proposition and possibility statements.

Pygmalion effect: An area of research that provides empirical understanding of the relational pathways of the positive image-positive action dynamic.

S.

Simultaneity: A fundamental principle and belief within Appreciative Inquiry thought that recognizes that inquiry and change are not separated moments, but are simultaneous.

Social architecture: It addresses the design elements critical to an organization to support the positive core. The first step in the Design phase is to identify this architecture.

T.

Theme identification: Part of the Dream phase of the Appreciative Inquiry process where participants identify important threads from the interview data and summary sheets that pinpoint life-giving forces within the organization.

Transformative:  Having the power or tendency to transform. To change a system in nature, disposition, heart, character, or the like; to convert.  Appreciative Inquiry is a transformative  process for any organization.

W.

Wonder:  rapt attention or astonishment at something awesomely mysterious or new to one's experience.

Sections from (Cooperrider, 2003)

**Appendix B:**

**Provocative Proposition Five Descriptive Statistics**

**One-Sample Statistics**

|         | N  | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---------|----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| treat   | 30 | 3.20 | 1.126          | .206            |
| control | 51 | 2.43 | 1.652          | .231            |

**One-Sample Test**

|         | Test Value = 0 | | | | | |
|---------|--------|----|----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------|--------|
|         |        |    |                | Mean Difference   | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|         | t      | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |                  | Lower  | Upper |
| treat   | 15.559 | 29 | .000           | 3.200             | 2.78   | 3.62  |
| control | 10.508 | 50 | .000           | 2.431             | 1.97   | 2.90  |

**Appendix C:**

**Institutional Review Board Modification Approval**

The University of New Mexico

# Institutional Review Board Transmittal

Federalwide Assurance No. FWA00004690

*October 6, 2006*

***Principal Investigator(s):*** Carol Richmond
***Responsible Faculty:*** Charlotte Gunawardena
***Dept/Unit*** COE-OLIT MSC05 3040

*Your request for* **Expedited** *review has been:* **APPROVED** ☑

**Project Title**

An Appreciative Paradigm of Learning Persistence and Success in Online Courses

***Proposal*** #26173    ***Approval Date:*** 10/6/2006    ***End Date:*** 10/5/2007

***Sponsor*** None

***Re-approvals*** 0        ***Modifications*** 0

The Main Campus Institutional Review Board at the University of New Mexico has reviewed and approved the above referenced protocol. Your study has been approved for one year. As the principal investigator of this study, you assume the following responsibilities:

***Renewal:*** Your protocol must be re-approved each year in order to continue the research. You must submit a Progress Report by **9/5/2007** requesting re-approval prior to the end date of your study.

***Adverse Events:*** Any adverse events or reactions must be reported to the IRB immediately.

***Modifications:*** Any changes to the protocol, such as procedures, consent/assent forms, addition of subjects, or study design must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval.

***Informed Consent/Assent:*** If applicable, attached are your consent/assent forms stamped with approval and expiration dates for your use as master copies when enrolling participants.

***Completion:*** When the study is concluded, submit a Final Report Form to close your study.

IRB Specialist

Trini H. Baca Rivera, tbrivera@unm.edu
Research Compliance Services, Main Campus IRB
(505) 277-0040

**Appendix D:**

**Consent To Participate**

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**
**FACULTY INTERVIEW**

- **INTRODUCTION**

  You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Carol Richmond, a Ph.D. candidate in the Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology Program in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico. Your interview responses will help my dissertation research study on persistence in higher education online courses. You were identified as a possible volunteer in the study because you are teaching an online course this Fall 2006 term.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

  I would like to hear your stories about learning and persisting in online classes at CNM in order to discover what factors have helped your students to learn and stay motivated. The conversations that take place during the study are designed to identify your positive perceptions of online course persistence and success. Your recommendations about what will help to create an exceptional online course experience will also be collected. As a teacher of online courses, your successful experiences and perceptions of what is necessary for student achievement and persistence will help my dissertation study.

- **PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES**

  If you are willing to participate in this research project you will be asked to participate in one interview of approximately one-hour with me. The focus of the interview will be the best-of-the-best practices of learning, persistence, and success in an online course. You will be asked to share your success stories, which will be collected by me in writing. I may tape the interview, if you give me permission. You may request a copy of the transcription by making a written request to me by email (see below).

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

  The risks to your participation in this study are minimal. You may feel uncomfortable discussing your online class experiences. The risks to participating in this study are minimal professionally in that I am the Achievement Coach and responsible for student retention and success in the Business & Information Technology Division and I work closely with you as faculty to help students to succeed. This interview will be different from our other professional interactions or student/ course discussions in that for this conversation you will sign a consent form agreeing to participate. Your name will be kept confidential.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

  The benefit to this study may be a better understanding of what it takes to promote successful online learning. The study will generate a thematic proposition designed to help students thrive in online courses. You may request a copy of the findings by making a written request to me by email (see below).

  You can choose whether to participate in this study or not. If you volunteer to participate, you may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. *"By signing this consent form, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study."*

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