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Factors Related to Successful Course Completion in an Online Program for Returning High School Dropouts

Barbara Rothweiler

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Barbara M. Rothweiler

Candidate

Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology

Department

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Dissertation Committee:

Charlotte N. Gunawardena, Chairperson

Mark Salisbury

Alicia F. Chavez

Charlotte Hendrix

**FACTORS RELATED TO SUCCESSFUL COURSE COMPLETION IN AN ONLINE
PROGRAM FOR RETURNING HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS**

by

Barbara M. Rothweiler

B.A., Biology, University of Missouri, 1972
M.A., Education, University of Texas, 1984
Ed.S., Administration, University of New Mexico, 1998

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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BARBARA M. ROTHWEILER

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Ed.S., Administration, University of New Mexico, 1998
Ph.D., Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology,
University of New Mexico, 2012

ABSTRACT

Dropping out of high school has been declared an educational crisis in the United States with national and individual consequences. In New Mexico, adult dropouts only option for a high school credential has been a GED. In August 2010, Graduate New Mexico (GNM), an online asynchronous program, was implemented to help adult dropouts earn a high school diploma. The program was closed in March 2011.

The purpose of this study is to determine the factors related to successful course completion of the GNM program that helped returning dropout students complete online course work. Using a qualitative design and interviews as the method of inquiry, 23 students, the full-time teachers, and administrators were interviewed. Three main research questions and related sub-questions were asked to seek out reasons for dropping out of high school, the impact dropping out had on their lives, the reason for returning to school, and the factors they identified that made them successful in the GNM course work.

Students identified a number of factors of success centering on time management and communication skills: convenience, study flexibility, elimination of transportation and childcare needs, communication with teachers, and learning was within a limited self-paced structure. Technology and safety factors of success included: tutoring online and face-to-face, challenging and rigorous curriculum, easy to use technology, technical support, better focus on studies, uninterrupted attention from the teacher, support from family and friends and increased students' safety. Additional findings included arrested development, generational clientele, and program accountability.

Factors needing improvement surfaced as potential factors of success. These included 24-hour technology help, resources such as textbooks and a library, better program planning, buy-in from superintendents across the State of New Mexico, site coordinator training, diagnostic evaluations determining readiness for online learning, and mandatory face-to-face orientation programs before students begin.

The results are significant for students, instructional designers, and policy makers. Future research recommendations include engaging and keeping dropouts in online education, application of learning principles for the dropout, differentiated curriculum for online courses, parental value of research, and determining the value of the online diploma to the dropout students and their children.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The high school dropout rate in the United States has reached epidemic proportions and was described as a crisis in the American educational system (Ferdig, 2010; Left behind in America: the nation's dropout crisis," 2009; Studies, 2009; Zachry, 2010). Reports from financial and educational sources (Bank, 2011; Child Trends," 2011; A drop-out problem," 2010; Gewertz, 2008; Jones, 2005; Nyhan, 2010; Stillwell, 2010; Thornburgh, 2006; Trends, 2011) raise concern about the impact of record dropout rates on individual students, their families, and the nation. Since 1945, there has been a decline in the number of students who successfully completed high school in the United States. More recently, the overall high school graduation rate was reported at approximately 75% nationally, with dropout statistics between 14% and 25%. Graduation rates for ethnic minorities, such as Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans, were even lower (Bridgeland et al., 2006, Kolstad and Kaufman, 1989). However, some researchers believed (Mishel & Roy, 2006a, 2006b) that the actual high school completion rate has not been accurately reported since many dropouts actually complete a diploma or GED within a few years of dropping out (Kolstad & Kaufman, 1989; NCES, 2004). These researchers contend that dropout rates across the board were actually decreasing or have plateaued. New Mexico ranked 48th in the nation in graduation rates, only ahead of Nevada and Georgia ("The New Mexico Dropout Rate: Contributing factors and implications for policy," 2009).

Defining the Problem

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, signed into law in 2002, was one response to the educational crisis in American public schools. NCLB defined national

educational goals for public schools and dictated goals and benchmarks that must be met by each elementary and secondary public school on an annual basis, otherwise known as annual yearly progress (AYP). There were a number of problems with NCLB. One problem with the NCLB ACT was that it fostered higher dropout rates. If failing students dropout, their school had a better chance to make AYP with a lower failure rate on standards based assessments. This scenario allowed the school to report higher graduation percentages. Even though “NCLB gave schools strong incentives to raise graduation rates by any means possible” (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007), students who left school early due to failure could be classified not as dropouts but pushouts, that is, not wanted by the educational system because their scores lowered the school’s academic standing. As a result, without them, the graduation rates appear to be better.

The NCLB Act was not only about increasing rigor in the classroom and improving test scores; graduation rates were also addressed by President George W. Bush. All states were now required to report graduation rates using the same formula. Data used nationally to compute the graduation rate came from a number of sources: the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD), the Current Population Survey (CPS) of the United States Census Bureau, and the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS). There was great discussion as to the accuracy of graduation rates using these data sources. At one time the General Education Development (GED) certificates and certificates of attendance were counted in the graduation rates. However, NCLB changed that dynamic and only a student who earned a diploma in alignment with the school’s and/or state’s standards may be included in the calculation of graduation rates (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2007, p. 4). In addition, there were intrinsic biases in the data that reflected the graduation

rates of groups such as immigrants, military family members, incarcerated young people as well as ethnic and racial minorities. With that said, Heckman and LaFontaine (2007) used the 2000 CCD and census data which they found was in close agreement to determine graduation rates for the graduating classes of 1994-1998 (cohorts). From the 2000 Census, the graduate rate was estimated at 77.1% and the CCD estimated graduation rate was 76.6%. The estimated graduation rates from the 2000 Census for white students was 81%; for African American students was 66%; and for Hispanic students was 63%. Graduation rates estimated from the CCD data was 80.5% for white students, 62% for African American students, and 65% for Hispanic students (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2007, p. 17).

The National Center for Education Statistics reported 613,379 students dropped out of grades 9-12 during the 2007-2008 school year, averaging a 4.1% state dropout rate. Studying each grade level, the rates increased as the grade increased. In Grade 9 the average dropout rate was 3.0% and rose to 6.1% by Grade 12. The racial/ethnic dropout rates were determined to be 2.8% for whites, 6.7% for African Americans, and 6.0% for Hispanics. Compared to the overall graduation rate, these dropout rates appear to be aligned. However, dropout rates for Native American, Alaska Natives, Asians, and Pacific Islanders were not included. Males, especially minority males, were more likely to drop out than females. African American students and Hispanic students were more likely to dropout than white students. Similarly, foreign-born students were more likely to drop out than American born students (NCES, Child Trends Data Bank).

The average freshman graduation rate (AFGR) was the rate that freshman graduate on time, meaning within four years. This rate was not a cohort based rate, but based on the enrollment of grades 8, 9 and 10. In New Mexico, the AFGR for the 2007-2008 school year

was 66.8%. The event dropout rate is the percentage of students who drop out of public high school over a given year. The New Mexico EDR for the same period of time was reported at 5.2% of public high school students. Males dropped out at a higher rate (5.7%) than females (4.7%) (NCES).

Consequences Associated with Dropping Out

There were several negative consequences for the individual, the family, and the community for dropping out of high school. Pre-dropout behaviors such as poor school attendance, discipline issues, class failure, gang affiliations, low engagement with classmates and teachers all led to a student's decision to drop out. Many high school dropouts found themselves in frustrating and unhappy circumstances. Many realize that they did not have the literacy skills needed to move their lives forward or to find employment. The lack of reading skills, English writing skills, and mathematical calculation skills held them back from moving to the next grade, engaging in class work, and bonding with teachers and peers. With these deficits, dropouts were less financially productive over a lifetime. For those dropouts who gained employment, wages were significantly less than those students who completed high school and received a diploma. Dropout wages declined since the 1970s, increasing the gap between dropouts and diploma earners (Heckman and Fontaine, 2007). Consequently, many dropouts reported poor self-esteem, viewing themselves as inadequate when compared to their peers. They felt isolated and reported that their diploma holding peers see them differently once they left school. As individuals, dropouts developed more health issues than normal adolescents and had a lower life expectancy than their graduated peers (Ferdig, 2010).

Many dropouts were unemployed or had a difficult time finding employment due to insufficient literacy skills as well as their lack of a high school diploma. They did not pay taxes. They were likely to depend on unemployment and medical benefits which burden the financial systems of the city, state, and federal government budgets. This group of former high school students tended to be dependent on government assistance such as Medicaid, food stamps, and housing assistance (Ferdig, 2010, p. 5). High crime rates of this population increased the costs of the justice system, with higher costs for jail or prison. In turn, they became a tax burden for the local citizenry. As they age, dropouts tended not to vote or participate in any type of civic events or community service.

In the social matrix, many dropouts lost the friends they once had in high school because their life circumstances, such as taking care of a child or working, took them out of the normal school routine. Family difficulties arise because parents were not happy with their child's decision to leave school early. Dropouts may be young parents, single parents, or divorced (Ferdig, 2010). Crime rates among dropouts were high and many lived in neighborhoods that were areas of high crime. Teen dropouts were eight times as likely to end up in jail or prison (p. 5).

The Challenge and Opportunity

Distance education and online learning took education in a new direction, particularly for students in need of credit recovery. Approximately 36 states across the nation created virtual high schools. New Mexico was one of those states. Online learning was an alternative way for students who failed a course to recover credit and graduate on time. Online learning afforded students additional courses their school may not offer. Students enrolled in courses for many reasons, such as to earn additional credit to prepare for college

entry or a college major, to gain Advanced Placement (AP) credit, or just to take a course of interest to the student. Online learning afforded an opportunity to those students who dropped out of high school to return to the virtual school to continue their education and earn a high school diploma.

Former Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico expressed concern about the dropout rate and the quality of life of a dropout. He stated that a healthy economy is based on 21st century skills and that everyone must have a high school diploma to sustain themselves and a family.

“To sustain New Mexico’s growing economy and workforce, all New Mexican’s must at the very least graduate from high school. We must accept that in the 21st century, to secure a job that will support a family and provide a decent quality of life, a high school diploma is a must” (New Mexico Business Weekly, August 5, 2009).

New Mexico held a unique place among states that offer online learning. IDEAL-NM (Innovative Digital Education and Learning-New Mexico, (<http://ideal-nm.org>) was the agency that offered online learning under the authority of the Education Department of the State of New Mexico. This program afforded New Mexico learners the opportunity to take online classes. Its uniqueness was in offering courses to students in secondary education, post-secondary education, governmental agencies, and Work Force Solutions, a state agency offering education opportunities to New Mexico workers to improve the workforce. In contrast, most states offer online courses as either credit, credit recovery or asynchronous K-12 programs (Watson et al., 2010). IDEAL-NM was governed by both the Public Education Department (Willging & Johnson) and the Higher Education Department (HED).

The Graduate New Mexico (GNM) program was initiated under the auspices of IDEAL-NM. This program was designed to bring back 10,000 high school dropouts into the educational system to complete their high school diploma by the 2010-2011 school year. It was an \$8.9 million project which was funded for two years with federal stimulus money. The Graduate New Mexico program allowed high school dropouts of any age to return to high school to complete academic requirements to earn a high school diploma.

Online classes offered by the GNM program were 18-week, asynchronous courses which students could enroll in and begin at any time. Licensed instructors taught in their areas of expertise and were assigned students as they enrolled. Once a course was completed, the instructor assigned a grade. That grade was sent to the site coordinator of the high school through which the student enrolled for placement on the student's transcript. IDEAL-NM and GNM were not diploma granting entities but acted as facilitators by providing online courses for students to complete high school course requirements. Students were granted a diploma from the high school that facilitated the GNM enrollment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to determine the factors related to successful course completion in an online program for returning high school dropouts to earn a high school diploma. In this research, success is defined as those factors that helped students complete an online course leading to the completion of the requirements for a high school diploma. Using a qualitative research design, I sought to understand through in-depth interviews the adult dropout students' educational journey from the time they left high school through their experience in the GNM courses and the factors in the online learning environment they identified as successful leading to course completion. In addition, interviews were conducted

with faculty members and the administrators of the GNM program to identify factors that led to course completion for this target group of students.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

- 1.0 What were the factors that led students to drop out of high school?
- 2.0 What factors led students to return to high school?
 - 2.1 What factors prompted drop out students to return for a high school diploma program online instead of returning to a face-to-face high school class?
- 3.0 What factors do high school dropouts returning to school believe will help them complete an online course in a high school diploma completion program?
 - 3.1 What resources will help students successfully complete an online program?
 - 3.2 What factors of the online program will help students succeed when compared to their former high school educational experience?
 - 3.3 What are the challenges and barriers to course completion?

Method

This research used a qualitative research design employing in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and program administrators associated with the Graduate New Mexico (GNM) program. A qualitative design allowed participants to reveal in-depth reflections about their educational experiences, dropout experiences, the impact on their lives, and their involvement in the GNM program. Participants were recruited from the GNM program. The GNM program enrolled adult students who desired a return to secondary education to complete their high school diploma. This qualitative research used a purposeful sampling technique to recruit student from this program to be in the study. The attributes of a

purposive sample are the criteria each participant must meet. In this case, the participants did not graduate from high school, must be or have been enrolled in the GNM program, and must be at least 18 years of age. Because this group of students was already formed, it was a convenience sample that was accessible to the researcher (Fraenkel and Warren, 2009). The only demographic data collected was gender and age for the student-participants. The research questions were answered by analyzing the data collected through individual interviews that led to identifying the factors of success in each participant's online experience.

Significance of the Study

The uniqueness of this study was that the GNM program was a high school online program, and the students were adult dropouts. In other words, the GNM program bridges a gap bringing high school programs and adult dropout learners online together. This study added to the literature by discovering and understanding the factors related to the successful course completion of adult dropout students who sought a diploma through an online program. Examining the adult dropout students' academic journey through online high school courses gave insight into the development of the individual as well as the cognitive, social, and technology development of the target audience. This study contributed to the field of high school education by addressing the factors that led to successful course completion. Educators and instructional designers were informed of the particular development and needs of this target group of students when designing an online program and offering support services. The GNM program was the only program in the State of New Mexico that offered an opportunity for adult dropouts to earn a diploma. This study hoped to demonstrate the significance and importance of this program to better the quality of life for

New Mexico citizens, given the high dropout rate in this state and the resulting economic impact on individuals and the state as a whole.

Limitations of This Study

New Mexico holds a unique place among states that offer online learning because it offers online education to a number of entities: government, Workforce Solutions, high school students, and adult students through online GED and GNM programs. IDEAL-NM (Innovative Digital Education and Learning-New Mexico) is the agency that offers online learning under the authority of the Public Education Department of the State of New Mexico.

This study focused on only one program, the Graduate New Mexico (GNM) program, which falls under the PED and HED and is a standalone program beside the regular secondary online program for high school students. The GNM program enrolled only students who have dropped out of high school. GNM participants in this study had to be at least 18 years of age.

All students in the GNM program were invited to participate in this study. However, student participation was strictly voluntary, and it was not anticipated that the entire student body of the GNM program would participate. This study also invited participation from those online teachers who instruct in the GNM program full-time, and administrators of the GNM program. For teachers and administrators, all questions pertained to the dropout experience of students and to factors that led to successful course completion in the GNM program for the students.

While the data collected and reported is from a volunteer target group of GNM students, the teacher and administrator perspectives were reported from all the students they

served, not just the volunteer participants in this study. The teachers and administrators did not know the composition of the target group of students in this study.

Key Terms

The following definitions are used for the purpose of this study:

Average Freshman Graduation Rate: a freshman student who graduates on time (four years), not a cohort, based on the average enrollment of grades 8, 9 and 10.

Cohort: the group of students who begins high school and graduates at the same time. For instance, Cohort 4 is the group of students who begins high school together and graduates together in four years. Cohort 5 is the group of students who begins high school together but may take a fifth year to graduate.

Common Core of Data (CCD) Dropout: the CCD defines a dropout as an individual who was enrolled in high school during the previous school year, was not enrolled as of October 1 of the current school year, and did not graduate from high school or earn another state of district type of certificate such as a GED for that cohort of students.

Credit Recovery: credit made up due to a failing grade while in high school or credit earned by successfully completing a high school course in a high school program after dropping out of high school.

Drop Out (College): it is difficult to define a college dropout because the colleges themselves do not agree upon one definition. It may be a student who has not re-enrolled after a period of time or who has dropped a course after a few weeks. On the other hand, a student may be considered a drop out from college if they have completed their educational goals but not earned a certificate or degree, or the student may have transferred to another institution.

Drop out (K-12): a student who has left school before high school graduation and has not earned a high school diploma. This is be the primary definition for this study.

Event Dropout Rate (Willging & Johnson): the percentage of public high school students who dropped out of high school over the course of a given year.

General Educational Development (GED): a certificate program that was developed for returning service men and women from World War II whose high school education was interrupted. Over time the purpose of the GED has changed, and it has become an equivalent to and, in some cases, a substitute for a high school diploma. There is well documented research that the GED is not equivalent to a high school diploma (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2007, p. 8).

Graduate New Mexico: (GNM) an online, asynchronous program for adult students returning to high school. The program is a means to earn a high school diploma. Students are registered in this program by a counselor at a public high school. The student's records are reviewed to determine credits earned and credits needed to complete graduation requirements. The coursework is completed through GNM, and credits are reported to the high school which is responsible for certifying the student for graduation and issuing the diploma.

High School Credential: a high school diploma

High School Diploma Substitute Credential: GED

Membership Unduplicated: the number of students counted to determine dropout rates; these are students who are counted only once even though they may have been listed on the student enrollment rosters for more than one school.

Students: this term refers to all students enrolled in the GNM program.

Student Satisfaction: factors that students identify that contribute to a successful online experience.

Student-Participants: this term refers to only the students interviewed in this research study. Administrators and teachers are delineated as administrators and teachers.

Success Factors: factors in the online environment that helped students complete a course leading to the requirements for a diploma.

Virtual School: a school that offers only online courses. Courses may be accessed by students from anywhere, world-wide, where ever a computer with Internet access is available. Student enrollment is defined by the virtual school. For instance, Florida Virtual School may enroll students worldwide while the GNM program only enrolls students in New Mexico. They offer students opportunities for credit recovery, advanced credit, and Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. Course offered by a virtual school are asynchronous design.

Summary

Dropping out of high school became a national crisis impacting both individuals and the nation. High school dropouts often had difficulty finding a job or were unemployed. Their social status with friends, who have completed high school, changed. Dropouts expressed lower self-esteem and poorer health than high school graduates. They were more dependent on social systems such as unemployment, Medicaid, and food stamps. Lifetime wages and productivity were lower than any other educational segment in society. Dropouts had insufficient skills in many academic areas as a result of their decision to drop out of high school. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated education for all students with educational goals stating that all students would be proficient in reading, math, and English

by 2014. These goals were illusive for the majority of New Mexico dropouts. In 2010, New Mexico offered an opportunity to dropouts in New Mexico through online learning to earn a high school diploma in the Graduate New Mexico (GNM) program under the auspices of New Mexico's virtual school, IDEAL-NM. Through this program, students made up the credits needed for graduation without having to attend a physical high school.

The purpose of this research was to discover the factors related to successful course completion in an online program for returning high school dropout students. This was achieved by using a basic qualitative research design, asking open-ended interview questions to determine the participants' dropout experiences and how those experiences influenced their decisions to return to an online education experience. Participants were in a course or had completed a course in the GNM program. Of primary importance was the qualitative data, the story of their educational experiences. In the interview, participants were asked to identify the factors in their online experiences that led them to successfully complete the course. The significance was two-fold. First, by identifying these success factors instructional designers and educators can improve teaching and learning for this population in an online environment. Second, increasing the number of students who have high school diplomas increases quality of life, self-reliance, self-esteem and self-sustenance while dependency on others, such as family and state systems, decreases. Students without diplomas have a difficult time securing jobs. Without a job, a person does not pay revenues to state and national agencies and becomes dependent on welfare and social systems, depleting government fund. When students earn a high school diploma they help to improve the economic development of the state and nation by paying taxes and reducing their dependency on social and welfare systems at both government levels.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Educators are faced with the problem of how to engage students in high school so they can and receive their high school diplomas. Students encountering social problems with peers and teachers and earning failing grades due to low skills in reading, math, and English are most at-risk of dropping out of high school. The dropout population suffers financially, personally and has a little chance of employment while society is burdened with less tax revenue, greater demands on social services, and potential criminal behavior. In the last decade NCLB mandated that all students reach benchmark proficiencies with the effect of increasing graduation rates, or the school would face the consequences of federal takeover. Arguably, if the dropout rates have not improved, especially for low income and minorities, then the true root of the problem has not been sufficiently addressed. What is the public educational system in New Mexico doing to quell the dropout rate and insure higher graduation rates? After students drop out of high school, what happens to them? What are their options to return to high school to complete their diploma program? Once the student leaves high school there appears to be no follow up and only one option to attain a high school credential that is not a diploma. The question for individual and national health and wealth becomes one of how to bring back high school dropout students and offer an opportunity for success to forward their lives. Until recently, the only option for New Mexico dropouts is to obtain a GED until implementation of the Graduate New Mexico program in August 2010.

The following questions framed this study by identifying the factors that led to success for adult high school dropouts who have returned to high school course work in an online environment.

The three main research questions and sub-questions are:

- 1.0 What were the factors that led students to drop out of high school?
- 2.0 What factors led students to return to high school?
 - 2.1 What factors prompted drop out students to return for a high school diploma program online instead of returning to a face-to-face high school class?
- 3.0 What factors do high school dropouts returning to school believe will help them complete an online course in a high school diploma completion program?
 - 3.1 What resources will help students successfully complete an online program?
 - 3.2 What factors of the online program will help students succeed when compared to their former high school educational experience?
 - 3.3 What are the challenges and barriers to course completion?

The theoretical frameworks for dropping out of school and adult learning are important foundations from which to study dropout students and the self-identified factors leading to success in the online environment. The literature addressing dropping out of high school builds a platform on which to understand this phenomenon, both from the perspective of the high school student and the college student. This study targets adults 18 years old and older who have life experiences which are different than many of their cohort members. Understanding the reasons for dropping out at the secondary level and their enrollment in the online adult diploma recovery experience offers insight into the students' struggles and their experiences in the online program. The students' experiences in the online program give

insight into their skill levels and academic strengths and weaknesses cognitively, socially, and technologically. The literature review identifies success factors for students using online learning. There is an absence of literature addressing adult students returning to the high school curriculum, and no literature about adults returning to high school in an asynchronous online setting. The literature review addresses the following: 1) theoretical frameworks; 2) the longitudinal nature of dropping out of high school; 3) defining dropout; 4) predictors for dropping out of high school; 5) predictors for dropping out of college in online programs; 6) characteristics of adult students returning to school and online learners; 7) high schools' endeavors to reduce dropout rates; 8) online education and virtual schools as a means to complete high school; 9) a review of student satisfaction factors in online education at the college level; and 10) design and method of this study.

Theoretical Frameworks

There are a number of theories that explain the underlying reasons why students drop out of high school and out of online college classes. As the theories attempt to explain the dropout phenomenon, they also explain retention in high school and in online college coursework.

Theory of social control. In 1969, Hirshi introduced the Theory of Social Control. He believed that human beings have a natural sense of belonging to others; they need to feel attached and part of a larger community. His theory identified four parts of the process of belonging: commitment, beliefs, attachment, and disengagement. If a student is not committed to finishing school or a class, sees no value in school and does not believe education is worth the effort, is not attached to school or the educational process in some

way, then the student will disengage from the educational setting and drop out (Archambault et al., 2010).

Engagement Theory. Engagement Theory is the identification with and participation at school. Identification as applied to the student refers to a sense of belonging at the school and the perceived worth or value of an education, much like Hirchi's attachment construct in the Theory of Social Control. Participation at school means the student responds in a positive way to the requirements and rules of the school and to the teachers and classes, takes part in activities in the classroom and the school, and participates in extra- and co-curricular after school activities. According to Engagement Theory, students who remain in school will have a greater sense of engagement the more they participate in school. On the other hand, students who are not engaged in class or school activities are likely to experience high absenteeism and encounter disciplinary measures for misbehavior. These students generally pull away from school and disengage from the learning environment. Finn's (1989) model of participation and identification support Engagement Theory as well (Archambault et al., 2009; Lee, 2007; McNeal, 1995).

Rumberger and Larson's (1998) model, as cited in Archambault et al. (2009), divides the idea of engagement into two components: social and academic. They specify the social aspect of school as class attendance, rule compliance, and active participation in school related activities. Academic engagement is described as student attitudes toward school and the ability to meet school performance expectations. These components are congruent with Engagement Theory and are essential to understand the dropping out process over time. "Through concepts of participation-identification, educational engagement, membership, and social and academic engagement, we can conclude that both behaviors and attitudes are

equally important in the hypothetical process that leads to school dropout” (Archambault et al., 2009. p. 653).

Social Integration Theory

Social Integration Theory began with French sociologist, Emile Durkheim. He is most well known for his theory’s connection to suicide. Durkheim defines social integration as the interaction of people with other people. Within this connection between people, there is validation for who they are and what they think. Durkheim states that people will experience mental disorders leading to suicide if they do not experience the emotional and physical benefits of being part of a community. Without the connection to a community, people may become depressed, physically unhealthy, and socially isolated which causes them to be unproductive members of the community and living unhappy lives. The lack of positive outlook as well as connection and validation from the community can lead to high levels of suicide.

Within the academic community of the school, peers, teachers, and administrators are important connections to each student and assign a part of the student’s validation. If these relationships are positive in the community and in the classroom, the student is more likely to experience integration both socially and academically. A student feels both part of the school community, connects to the school community, and develops a sense of belonging in the school community which supports Hirshi’s Theory of Social Control. Positive peer group and teacher and administrator relationships are important key constructs to retention in school and ultimately, graduation. Lack of a positive experience is a reason for students to drop out, which is a metaphor for suicide in Durkheim’s theory (Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin,

& Bracken, 2000; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Kember, 1989; McNeal, 1995; Richardson & Swan, 2003).

A most useful theory surrounding the adult dropout is that of Vincent Tinto. Tinto's theories address college students in residential status. His theory is rooted in Durkheim's model of social integration and suicide. College, like high school, is a social system with its own values and structure. Tinto theorizes that those students who cannot integrate academically or socially, that is, find their place of belonging, will have difficulty committing to finish their college studies and earn a degree or, by extension, complete high school and earn a diploma. Tinto found a direct relationship between commitment to future goals and completion of college. This can be extended to the high school—the high school student who has a direct relationship between commitment to future goals and earning a diploma has an enhanced chance of graduating on time. Insufficient interaction with others in college, both socially and academically, and exhibiting a lack of congruency with the values of the college leads Tinto to draw an analogy between the college or high school dropout and suicide (Tinto, 1975).

In later years, Tinto (1982) writes that the definition of dropout must be studied more closely to determine exactly the causes of college dropout. His original theory of “in or out” of college does not do justice to the problem of dropping out because Tinto does not take into consideration the struggles, obligations, or goals students have in their lives outside of school that may interfere with their academic life. He suggests further study look into the concepts of dropout vs. withdrawal from college.

Some literature criticizes Tinto's original theory stating that the questionnaires he used to collect data were never published and the methodology he employed during his study

was not solid. This puts Tinto's theory in jeopardy. In his working paper, (Draper, 2008) suggests expanding the definition of dropout. He suggests examining the qualitative responses from dropouts for a better understanding of the dropout dilemma. (Berger & Braxton, 1998) expand the theory to include relationships with college administrators so that students have understanding and input regarding decisions made at the college level. At the high school level, if students understand from administrators why rules or decisions are made, they are generally accepting of the decision and feel part of the system, i.e., integrated.

Summary. A number of theories address the phenomenon of dropping out of college. The level of engagement, social control, and integration a student develops in and with the college experience may define which students complete college and which students drop out. Theorists state that belonging to a community both academically and socially increases the chance of graduation at the post-secondary level. It is important to understand the theories refer to students of college age at college level. This research studies adult college age students who are attempting to complete requirements for a high school diploma. It is important to understand the past educational journey of the participants in this study to understand the reasons for dropping out as well as find their meaning in returning to a high school program as adults to determine if the theories will hold true for this population.

Longitudinal Nature of Dropping Out

One of the most interesting parts of Tinto's theory is that he supported the notion that drop out studies should be longitudinal. He and others point out that dropping out of school is a process, not a one shot experience, and happens over period of time (Tinto, 1988). The dropping out process can happen as early as Kindergarten or, more likely, third grade (Barclay & Doll, 2001; Hickman, Batholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008; Livingston,

1959) . What may seem to be insignificant absenteeism in the primary grades eventually turns out to be one absence every four days in high school. The second grader whose reading level is a year behind and is a disciplinary concern in the classroom may be starting the process of fading out of school. The high school student who is suspended for fighting, is reading at an elementary level, and has chronic absenteeism maybe on the road to dropping out. Family issues, failing grades, grade retention, teacher relationships, and social issues such as being bullied over a period of time are all reasons for a student to drop out of school. These children have low levels of self-esteem and see themselves as incompetent in school. They disengage from the academic and social circles of school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Bowers, 2010).

In Tinto's view, the longitudinal model has three steps: moving away from the high school, moving into a new school and community, and integrating into college life. Integration theory takes on the look of transition theory. However, many of the problems in high school begin in the late middle grades, eighth grade, and during the transition to high school. Transitioning from one school level to another may be emotionally tumultuous for some students. Students are moving out of a middle school that they have known for at least three years, sometimes leaving friends and teachers behind that they know and are comfortable with. Their sense of belonging to a community has disappeared. In the new high school, the transitioning eighth graders must learn the school's structure, values, rules, policies and processes as well as make new friends. Some students come to high school unprepared by their middle schools. Academically, they fall behind, the gaps in their

knowledge widen, and they cannot catch up. This leads to a greater risk of dropping out and not graduating (Bowers, 2010; Dianda, 2008).

Supporting the longitudinal theory, Lessard et al., (2008) cites three steps to dropping out. First, “setting the stage” in which the student experiences parental divorce or neglect, parental criminal activities, or death of a parent and placement in foster care resulting in moving, making new friends and getting accustomed to a new school. Second, the students are “teetering.” These student will try as hard as they can to keep things right in order to stay in school. It is a balancing act for the student. They may be embroiled in family turmoil and school is a calm and quiet place for them. They remain quiet and invisible in school so as not to get in trouble. They may struggle with undiagnosed learning difficulties. Teetering students are juggling these and other issues in their lives. If there is not a positive intervention, the day comes when they enter stage three: “the end of the journey.” The student just cannot handle life as it exists anymore and leaves school. This may be triggered by a pivotal moment in the child’s life such as an argument with a teacher or a suspension which sends the student over the edge and results in a drop out statistic (Lessard et al., 2008).

Summary. Dropping out of school is not a singular event. The student’s negative perspective of school based on negative experiences at school or in the family continues to grow until the student does not return. Transitioning from one school to another may be a confusing and emotionally tumultuous time for a student because the student’s comfort level has been disturbed and the student has a difficult time readjusting. It is important to understand the longitudinal nature of dropping out to determine reasons for and timing of the adult student returning to high school and, in this study, how online learning has overcome the student’s previous negative experiences.

Defining “Dropout”

Barclay and Doll (2001) write that the dropout studies began in the 1950s. By the late 1950s it was apparent that the dropouts of this era were the unskilled laborers of the 1960s. Dropping out led to a downward social mobility. By the mid-1960s the definition of “dropout” was becoming difficult to apply consistently because various empirical studies were using differing methodologies to determine the dropout situation, so a “single, national understanding of the nature and scope of the dropout problem was non-existent” (p. 359). A conference was convened in 1963 to standardize the approach to studying the dropout phenomenon which did not lead to conclusive results or definitions.

Even today, the definition of a dropout can be somewhat complex. Depending on the agency and the methodology used to determine the number of dropouts, the definition may change. However, the operational definition of a dropout from high school has one common thread—the individual does not have a high school diploma. The Common Core of Data (CCD) defines a dropout as an individual who was enrolled in high school at some time during the previous school year, is not enrolled in a school on October 1 of the next school year, and did not graduate from high school or complete some other district or state certificate program, such as a GED. Those students who died, moved to another state, or are out of school due to illness are not counted. The Child Trend Data Bank definition of dropout is an individual who is non-institutionalized, in the civilian population, is not enrolled in high school, has not graduated from high school, and is between the ages of 16 and 24 years old. This definition infers that the person over 24 years old is no longer a dropout. The Child Trend Data Bank does not identify the category of persons over 24 years

old even though they meet the criteria of a dropout, including lack of a high school diploma and unemployed, underemployed, or dependent on state and/or federal aid.

Warren and Halpern-Manners (2007) compared the definitions and rates of dropouts between the CCD and the Common Population Survey (CPS). Their conclusions were that the CPS underestimates the rates of student dropout using their definition. The CPS cites about a 10% dropout rate. Using the CCD definition, which includes students from private schools and GED recipients, Warren finds that about one in four students, or 25%, do not graduate. Within the overall statistic 50% of the Hispanic students and 50% of the non-Hispanic African Americans students do not graduate. Other researchers also concur that the dropout rate in high schools is 25% (Ferdig 2010; Alspaugh, 1998, Rumberger, 1987). Males generally have a higher dropout rate than females. Individual student minority groups, such as Hispanics, African American and Native Americans, students living in poverty, special education students, and English as a Second Language students, have higher dropout rates overall than the national average (Dianda, 2008; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008; Rumberger, 1987).

Rumberger (1987) describes the ambiguous nature of the dropout definition by stating that there is no singular definition. This leads researchers to believe that the dropout rates quoted in the literature may be speculations because no one really knows how many dropouts there are. His argument is that the definition of a dropout may depend on a number of items such as the membership in a cohort and the time passed for determining dropout status. He defines a dropout as a “residual status, indicating someone who has not graduated from, or is not currently enrolled in, a full-time, state-approved education program (p. 105).

There are some districts that consider a student holding a GED as a graduate, not a dropout. The Census Bureau uses still another definition which agrees with these school districts. Individuals who hold a diploma or an equivalent certificate, such as a GED, are not considered dropouts. Including both diploma and GED students increases the rate of graduation and makes schools and districts look favorable to their constituents. A number of arguments have been put forth demonstrating that those individuals who hold a GED do not match their diploma holding counterparts (Compolieti, Fang, & Gunderson, 2010; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007; Murname, Willett, & Boudett, 1995). As compared to diploma holders, GED students have a more difficult time finding work, getting promotions, and attaining similar salaries.

New Mexico dropout definition. In the state of New Mexico, the New Mexico Public Education Department has its definition of dropout: A student is considered a dropout if he or she was enrolled at any time during the previous school year, is not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year, and does not meet certain exclusionary conditions” (Garcia, 2010). The exclusionary conditions include passing the GED, being home schooled, counting as duplicates within or across districts, enrolling in a different district at the end of the year or at the beginning of the next school year or graduating during the summer.

New Mexico Graduation Rates

Student school completion information is reported as either graduation rates or dropout rates. When evaluating either drop out or graduation rates it is important to remember that these are not absolute numbers but numbers that reflect the general status of education. Many variables, such as grade retention, failing grades, and family issues, play into both dropout rates and graduation rates. In Domrzalski’s article *There’s more to*

graduation rates than dropout numbers (2009), the reporter interviews the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) Executive Director for Instruction and Accountability, Rose-Ann McKernan. She states that in 2008 APS had a 44.2% graduation rate while the state's graduation rate was 54%. At the same time the dropout rate for APS was 17.8%. The numbers do not account for 100% of the students. McKernan stated that calculating dropout rates is tricky because there are students who are unaccounted for at the time the numbers are collected. Some have moved or transferred to another district or to private schools and do not alert APS that they are leaving the district and fail to pick up withdrawal packets. Some dropouts return to school at a later time and are not counted in the graduation cohort in which they began high school. This may indicate that longitudinal data on dropout rates and graduation rates for cohorts could be studied to determine more accurate dropout and graduation rates.

In 2010, legislation was initiated addressing the five year graduation rate. In a 2010 press release from the New Mexico Department of Public Education (Friedman & Montoya, 2010) five year cohort graduate rates are quoted as 66.2% for the 2008 cohort which was up from the 60.3% graduation rate for the four year cohort. Native American students have the greatest jump, from 49.8% to 59.7%, when comparing four and five year cohort graduation rates. Eighty-one of the eighty-nine New Mexico school districts report an increase in the 2008 cohort graduation rates as indicated from the four to five year rates. The report continues to state that this data indicate that more academic support, such as tutoring and differentiated instruction, is needed for students to graduate on time, that is, in four years. However, those students who need the fifth year should be encouraged to stay in school and complete their diplomas.

Faircloth and Tippeconnic (2010) report in their study that New Mexico has one of the largest Native American i.e., American Indian/Alaska Native, populations in the nation. They compare graduation rates by race/ethnicity and found that Native Americans have the lowest graduation rates among Asians, Caucasians, African Americans, and Hispanics, in that order. Their study also finds that in general males (49.1%) have lower graduation rates than females (59.8). This holds true when comparing rates among Native American males (39.2) and females (50.1), who maintain the lowest graduate rates for males and females found in New Mexico as compared to other states. These statistics are calculated using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) with numbers derived from the NCES CCD data using student numbers in grades nine through twelve in the fall of 2002 and 2003.

The New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) publishes the New Mexico Facts Sheet ("NMPED School Facts Sheet," 2011), which gives current data outlining the four year cohort graduation rates for 2009 and 2010 and the five year cohort statistics for 2009 (Table 1). Statistics are given statewide and by individual school district. This report delves deeper into the New Mexico dropout rates and confirms the national report by Faircloth and Tippeconnic (2010). The results are similar statewide and for the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) for the 2009 and 2010 four year cohorts. Females graduate at higher rates than males. Ethnically, Native American students have the lowest graduation rates; the highest percentages of graduates are Asian, Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic students, in that order.

Statewide, in the 2009 five year cohort, African Americans demonstrated the largest increase in graduation rates. In APS, data shows a significant increase in Native American graduation rates for the 2009 five year cohort (see Table 1). This indicates that the concern

by districts and the public over four year dropout rates may not be warranted and other variables play into students not completing high school in four years. It may also indicate an overemphasis on the four year program and not give enough credence to a five year high school graduation program. Over time many dropouts return to school to obtain a diploma or GED. If they are then counted in their cohort as a graduate, that cohort's graduation rate improves (NCES, 2004; Rumberger, 1987)

Table 1. Cohort Graduate Rates, 2009 and 2010
(New Mexico Facts Sheet, 2011)

	2010 Cohort-4 Yr		2009 Cohort-4 Yr		2009 Cohort-5Yr
	N	%	N	%	%
Statewide					
All Schools	26,490	67.3	27,058	66.1	70.5
Female	12,895	72.0	13,118	70.0	73.7
Male	13,595	62.8	13,940	62.5	67.5
Caucasian	7,863	75.6	8,554	74.5	78.3
African American	616	62.1	748	61.4	68.5
Hispanic	14,394	64.1	13,869	63.0	67.3
Asian	351	83.9	345	80.0	85.2
American Indian/ Alaskan Indian	3,266	60.5	3,542	57.8	64.3
Albuquerque Public Schools					
All Students	7,260	64.7	6,969	65.1	69.8
Female	3,547	70.2	3,384	69.0	72.7
Male	3,713	59.4	3,585	61.4	66.9
Caucasian	2,200	74.4	2,459	76.0	79.1
African American	238	58.7	338	61.4	69.8
Hispanic	4,260	60.8	3,576	58.2	63.5
Asian	159	84.8	175	77.2	82.9
American Indian/Alaskan Indian	403	44.4	421	52.5	61.4

New Mexico Dropout Rates

The most current information addressing New Mexico dropout rates come from a yearly report for the school year ending in 2008 ("2007-2008 New Mexico student dropout report,") as shown in Table 2. This document reports dropout rates for seventh through twelfth grades. For this reporting year, dropout rates remained high but decreased. The dropout rate for middle grades seven and eight dropped from 1.6% to 1.1%; similarly, the dropout rate for grades nine through twelve decreased from 5.8% to 4.9% for the state overall.

Table 2. Dropout Rate Across Grade Levels for 2007-2008
(2007-2008 New Mexico Student Dropout Report)

Grade	07-08 Membership	07-08 Dropouts	07-08 Dropout Rate	09-12 Membership	09-12 Dropouts	09-12 Dropout Rate
2008	50,894	543	1.1%	103,070	5,047	4.9%
2007	50,720	797	1.6%	100,134	5,832	5.8%

Table 3 depicts the dropout rates for the State of New Mexico by gender and ethnicity. Females have a lower dropout rate than males. Ethnically, the lowest dropout rates are for Asian/Pacific students and Caucasian students, while the ethnic groups with the highest dropout rates in New Mexico are African American students and American Indian/Alaskan students.

Table 3. Dropout Rate by Gender and Ethnicity for 2007-2008
(2007-2008 New Mexico Student Dropout Report)

Gender	MEM (unduplicated)	Drop #	Rate
Female	75,269	2,482	3.3%
Male	78,695	3,108	3.9%
Ethnicity			
Asian/Pacific	2,005	48	2.4%
African American	4,139	168	4.1%
Caucasian/White	47,238	1,195	2.5%
Hispanic	81,489	2,917	3.6%
American Indian/Alaskan	19,093	1,262	6.6%
Total	153,964	5,590	3.6%

The most recent dropout statistics reported by the New Mexico Public Education Department's (2011) Data Collection and Reporting Bureau for the Albuquerque Public Schools for grades seven through twelve for the 2010 school year is unduplicated membership of 44,154 with a dropout number of 2,696, which translates to a 6.11% dropout rate (2011).

Reported reasons for dropping out of school by New Mexico students. New Mexico students leave school before diploma completion for a number of reasons as reflected in Table 4 ("2007-2008 New Mexico student dropout report"). The top three reasons students are counted as dropouts are the following: did not reenroll (19.6%), invalid transfer (16.4%), and intends to take the GED (14.2%). For 32.1% of the students, the reason for dropping out of school is unknown. This shows the difficulty of defining and addressing

solutions to the dropout crisis. There may be many more reasons why students drop out of New Mexico schools.

Table 4. Reasons New Mexico Students Drop Out
(2007-2008 New Mexico Dropout Report)

Reason	%	Reason	%
Invalid transfer, no transcript requested	16.4	Expelled, did not return	0.7
Lack of interest	8.6%	Pregnancy, unable to return	0.6
Did not reenroll, no transcript requested	19.6	Unable to adjust	0.7
Intends to take GED	14.2	Left school to work	1.9
Suspended, did not return	0.7	Failing, unable to complete work	0.4
Parental request	1.2	Child care problems	1.9
Runaway, unable to locate	0.6	Married and left school	0.2
Illness	0.3	Other (unknown)	32.1
Total			100

Summary. Defining the term “dropout” is a consistent problem. A variety of attempts to standardize the definition skews both quantitative and qualitative data. Some of the difficulty in determining dropout status focuses on whether a student with a GED is counted as a high school completer. Here, the debate is whether a person holding a GED has a truly equivalent education compared to a student who has completed all the courses in high school required for graduation. The debate includes effort on the students’ part and the rigor of the curriculum. Considering effort and curriculum rigor, the difference between achieving a high school diploma and a GED is a factor in choosing whether a dropout earns a GED or chooses to return to high school classes for the diploma. The gap between dropout rates and graduation rates must be realized; the five year cohort rates may show there are other

variables playing into these numbers. However, the current graduation rates, even though increasing, indicate that Asian, Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students in New Mexico statewide and in the local school district may not be increasing significantly, especially in light of NCLB expectations.

Dropout Rate in Post-Secondary Schools and Corporate America

The dropout rate in online courses at the college level ranges from 10% to 70% (Milligan et al., 2008; Frankola, 2001; Jun, 2005; (Fozdar, Kumar, & Kannan, 2006); Henke and Russum, 2001). These rates reflect academic courses taken for a degree as well as career enhancing professional development taken enhance enrichment for job training and/or promotion. This is a wide range to consider with a variety of influences leading to a definition without a common thread. The wide range is an indication of the need for a standardized dropout definition. Milligan and Buchenmeyer (2008) cite college level completion rates at 10% to 50%, which means dropout rates range from 50% to 90%. In their study of pre-assessment methods for screening education students at Purdue University, they found approximately a 13% dropout rate over six semesters after establishing a pre-assessment strategy. Fozdar et al., (2006) examined the dropout rates at Indira Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU) in the Bachelor of Science three year degree program. The researchers found that about 50% of the students dropped out of the program after the first year and about 30% dropped out after the second year. Tyler-Smith (2006) maintains online education dropout rates are as high as 70-80% at the college level. Most researchers consider dropout rates for online learning greater than in traditional face-to-face classrooms. Tyler-Smith quotes research stating that undergraduate rates are about 40-45%, which has remained steady for years. Dropout rates are of concern to executives in corporate American.

Park and Choi (2009) report research stating, “Seventy percent of adult learners enrolled in a corporate online program did not complete” the course (p. 207). While studying corporate courses at IBM, Henke and Russum (2009) found course dropout rates between 19% and 23%. Frankola (2001) quotes a report from the *Chronicle of High Education* that states that educational institutions report dropout rates between 20% and 50% for online learners while institutional administrators agree that the online dropout rates are 10% to 20% higher than in face-to-face classes. In her study of corporate online learning, Frankola continues to state that the corporate Penn State online dropout rate is only 5% while the UCLA corporate curriculum dropout rate is 15% to 20%. Whether in college level online education or corporate online training, dropout rates vary, meaning some students are dissatisfied with the course expectations or the instructor, or the employer may not reward the employee for additional training.

Defining the dropout in an online course at the college level is more complicated than it is in high school. High school, or secondary education, is compulsory up to a student’s prescribed age as defined by each state. For example, the compulsory secondary age limit for New Mexico is 18 years old. Other states list ages between 16 years old and 17 years old. Post-secondary education is not compulsory and does not subscribe to age limits. To further complicate matters, colleges and universities each define the dropped out student in their own way. Because the operational definition of drop out is conflicting from college to college, it becomes impossible to make any comparisons between two institutions (Munro, 1987). Therefore, dropout rates from college to college can be deceiving.

A college dropout out may simply be a person who does not re-enroll the semester after completing a course. Or, students may be classified as a dropout after a couple of

months of inactivity or after not re-enrolling in another course for two to three semesters (Shin & Kim, 1999). In an online course, a dropout may be a student who fails to turn in the first assignment after a specified period of time. Some colleges do not consider a student who drops a course a dropout if the student withdraws from the course during the add/drop period. For other post-secondary institutions, students are considered dropped out if they do not download the course material, or if they begin a course but do not complete any of the assignments, quizzes, or exams (Henke & Russum, 2001).

Sometimes students are categorized as a dropout, but they have “dropped out” or not returned to the college for a positive reason (Woodley, 2004). Some students may have only wanted to take a few classes. Others may have transferred to another post-secondary institution. Still, others may have “dropped out” because of family or work requirements. This type of dropping out may have been in the best interest of the individuals, their work, and their families (Fozdar et al., 2006).

Summary. From this discussion, two conclusions may be drawn. First, forming a definition of a high school dropout is not as complicated as the definition of a college dropout. Second, the common thread for the high school definition of dropout is that the individuals do not have a high school diploma. The common thread when discussing the definition of a college dropout is that there is no common thread. Comparing definitions from one post-secondary institution to another is like comparing apples and oranges—the definition cannot be generalized. Workers enrolled in classes through their businesses have similar high dropout rates and suffer from the same lack of a standardized definition regarding their status.

Predictors for Dropping Out of High School

It is important to understand the reasons a student in high school chooses to drop out so that interventions including instructional design, differentiated instruction, school climate, counseling, and parental education and intervention may be put in place. The causes for dropping out are plentiful and sometimes difficult to determine, especially if the causes for dropping out took place over a long period of time as the literature suggests. As early as 1959, researchers began to report that the process of dropping out starts in elementary school and is compounded along the way through middle school and high school (Livingston, 1959; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

The reasons for dropping out of high school fall into two categories: “individual perspectives that focus on individual factors such as the students’ attitudes, behaviors, school performance, and prior experiences; and, an institutional perspective that focuses on the contextual factors found in students’ families, schools, communities, and peers” (Rumberger & Lim, 2008, p. 3). Individual perspectives may include the student’s engagement in the classroom and in the school community or behaviors such as high absenteeism or drug and alcohol use. Institutional perspectives that affect dropping out include the family’s attitude toward school, living in a neighborhood of high crime and unemployment, or the school’s climate. Others may describe these predictors as the “push” and “pull” reasons for dropping out. That is, the individuals’ perspectives pull students out of school while the institutional perspectives push students to drop out (Ferdig, 2010; Davy; Hernandez Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008; Lee & Breen, 2007; McNeil et al., 2008; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Thornburgh, 2006).

Within the individual and institutional perspectives a cluster of predictors or factors illustrates the complexity of dropping out. The longitudinal process of dropping out of high school (Alexander et al., 2001; Barclay & Doll, 2001; Hernandez Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008; Lessard et al., 2008) adds another level of complexity to the situation. The literature is extensive enough for teachers to be aware of the signs of a potential dropout and for the educational system to take action.

Individual predictors.

Educational performance. The educational performance of a student is a major predictor for dropping out. Students who dropped out of school list a number a reasons for doing so such as failing grades, entering middle or high school unprepared because their elementary or middle school experience left gaps in their education that they could not close, or they became discouraged because they had to repeat a grade.

Teacher assigned grades and test scores are initial predictors of high school dropout. Reading, English, and math (Bowers, 2010; Hickman et al., 2008) are the subjects most widely used to predict dropping out because these courses of study are universal keys to student success unlike courses such as American History. If students are failing these core classes the gap widens between high school achievers and non-achievers, and the likelihood of dropping out increases. In overall testing, low test scores increase the chance of dropping out. Similarly, low grades increase the likelihood of dropping out. Rumberger and Lim (2008) determined in their meta-analysis of dropout literature that teacher assigned grades are a more robust measure of dropping out than teacher created test scores. The reasoning behind this is because test scores are a reflection of a student's knowledge in one moment in time. Grades are a reflection of the student's ability academically, in comprehension, and in

critical thinking and problem solving over time. In general, the dropout statistics are more consistent (e.g. a higher proportion of statistically significant effects) when compared to grades than for ability demonstrated in test scores in a moment of time. “Test scores represent students’ ability measured at a specific time on a specific day, whereas grades reflect students’ effort as well as their ability throughout the school year” (p.19).

Bowers (2010) argues that while grades are the most widely used variable in determining dropout, teacher assigned grades or Grade Point Average (GPA) are not computed consistently from teacher to teacher, school to school, or district to district. Therefore, the calculation of grades is uneven and may only be a moderate predictor of dropping out of high school.

Longitudinal characteristics of dropping out. The longitudinal aspect of dropping out of school gives credence to the importance of elementary education and the fact that dropping out of high school is a journey starting very early in the student’s life (Livingston, 1959). Dropping out of school is not a phenomenon that happens just at the secondary level. It must be noted that the measured academic performance at the elementary and middle school levels are excellent predictors. Balfanz, Herzog and Mac Iver (2007) identified four warning signs of dropouts: failing math or English in the sixth grade, attendance less than 80% of the time, receiving a poor behavior grade, and suspension in grade six. Grades at these levels may be early indicators of future performance at the high school level and a predictor of a high school dropout as early as the upper elementary years (Balfanz et al., 2007; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Finn, 1989; Livingston, 1959; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Jimerson et al., (2000) examined the longitudinal nature of dropping out of school. These researchers followed the developmental transactional model. In this model, early developmental history is found to have an impact on later dropping out, albeit not exclusively; the impact of development at early pre-school ages is carried forward over the school years. The behaviors that result from early development have a partial impact on behaviors at school and in the family which can have an impact on the decision to drop out in the high school years.

Barclay and Doll (2001) find teacher observations of students in elementary school predicting dropout is highly accurate. They maintain by fourth grade, teachers could predict with 75% accuracy which students would eventually dropout. One of the first indicators teachers observe is that the student is failing English. In his research, Finn (1989) discusses student nonparticipation in the classroom. He states that nonparticipation can be recognized as early as third grade as defined by course grades, retention, and standardized achievement scores. Finn continues to cite research that shows a relationship between behavior ratings in kindergarten through third grade and discipline records, classroom misbehavior, and police involvement in high school as precursors to dropping out.

The longitudinal studies reference different transition points in a child's life such as beginning school or moving from one school to another (Alexander et al., 2001). A specific concept that stands out in the longitudinal nature of the drop out process is that of the transition to high school. When students are predisposed to dropping out, the transition to high school can be a tumultuous time in their lives. Unprepared for high school academically and socially, their failure rates go up. If the school or district does not create appropriate programs to assist students' transitions to high school, they can be overwhelmed and not

return. Positive social relationships and teacher interactions are crucial to successful transition to high school (Langekamp, 2010; Langenkamp, 2009; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008; Nield, 2009; Smith, 1997; Thornburgh, 2006).

Persistence. Persistence is generally defined as sticking to something until it is done. In reviewing 25 years of dropout literature, Rumberger and Lim (2008) find that persistence and student mobility are terms used together to describe students who move to another school or permanently or temporarily dropout and return at a later date, even if the time out of school is lengthy. There are a host of reasons why persistence in a student may be low, such as family educational value or family economics, but Rumberger and Lim's (2008) research indicate a positive relationship between student persistence in school, academic achievement, and student dropout rates. The more persistence a student shows, the greater the academic achievement and the less chance of dropping out.

Based on the traditional definition of persistence, that is, sticking to something until it is accomplished, is task persistence. Task persistence is defined by (Andersson & Bergman), (2011) as "the ability to persist and to sustain attention at a task, even in the presence of internal and external distractions" (p. 950). They consider task persistence to be a "competence factor." In their research, they studied competence in adolescents to determine if they could successfully handle the increasing developmental tasks that future education, society, and careers would demand of them. "We investigated the importance of task persistence in early adolescence for successful occupational and educational attainment in adulthood. They found that task persistence is a fundamental competency for men in occupational attainment and for educational attainment for both men and women. Relating this to high school, it is important to determine if the participants have task persistence, in

other words, good study skills, organization, and persistence, especially when course work becomes difficult.

Grade retention. Grade retention is related to academic achievement and persistence. Rumberger (1995) concluded that grade retention is the most powerful predictor of school dropout. Bowers (2010) cites similar findings in his research. A student who is retained in a grade in elementary or middle school has an increased chance of dropping out at a later date in their educational journey. There is “something about the retention experience indeed [that] makes repeaters more likely than non-repeaters to leave school without degrees...but the fact that grade retention as a destructive force first emerges in the middle grades may be a clue” (Alexander et al., 2001, p. 794). A consequence of retention is that the student becomes older than classmates or overage. While not all students who are overage are retained in an early grade—some, especially boys--may have started kindergarten at a later age due to lack of maturity or illness. Still, those who are overage are more likely to drop out and less likely to graduate from high school (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Stearns et al. (2007) reports that dropout rates increase significantly between those students who are retained and those who are promoted to the next grade. However, when looking at the models of dropout behavior (Finn, 1989), the researchers find that the gap between retained dropouts and continuously promoted students narrows when considering three other variables: students’ academic background, engagement with school, and social capital. The conclusion from this study is that if schools can engage students, and increase their academic skills and connections with peers, then dropout rates can be reduced.

Engagement in school. Engagement in school is the degree to which a student is bonded, committed, affiliated, involved, or attached to school. Alienation and withdrawal

are terms used to describe negative engagement with school by students (Finn, 1989).

Student engagement in school is manifested in behaviors such as attending class regularly, having homework completed on time, coming to school prepared for class, participating in class, attending after school tutoring with teachers, or participating in afterschool extracurricular activities such as school plays, band performances and practices, or participating as a player or observer of athletic events (McNeal, 1995).

An early study by Swift and Spivack (1969) measures participatory engagement in regular and special education students on 45 behaviors. Their research speaks to the theoretical frameworks of Hirshi and Tinto and Engagement Theory. Teachers rated their students on domains such as verbal interaction, rapport with peers, negative behaviors, anxiety, and restlessness in class and relationships with teachers. The results indicate that engagement in school is based on five areas common to both regular education and special education students: verbal interaction, rapport with teachers, inattentiveness, quiet-withdrawn behaviors, and poor work habits. Thus, participation and attachment to school are strong correlates to achievement in school and graduation from high school. With this in mind Finn (1989), forwards a four tier taxonomy of student engagement in school which evaluates engagement as a developmental process through time. Level one occurs in the early years of school in which children understand that they need to be attentive to the teacher, be prepared and respond to directions or questions by the teacher. Level two participation occurs when students initiate questions themselves and engage in dialogue with the teacher before, during, or after school, and go above and beyond the preparation needed for class. Students at the stage two level may participate in clubs or community activities with enthusiasm. They may take a summer job or internship. During level three, students

who are engaged in school are becoming autonomous and participate in out of school or after school events such as athletics, social, dances, or other extracurricular activities (p. 128).

Level four participation allows students to participate in the governance of the school.

Students may give input to curriculum, academic goals and decision making, and disciplinary policies. Drawing students into this model may help reduce dropout rates in high school.

Students who do not engage in school are at risk of dropping out. Finn (1989) proposed two models to study the drop out phenomena: the frustration-self-esteem model and the participation-identification model. The frustration-self-esteem model approaches dropping out from a negative perspective. Self-esteem is gained through positive school successes such as academic success. Many children enter school with positive self-esteem. Because of low ability and inadequate study habits, poor school performance, or poor instruction, children lose their positive outlook and begin to act out in school, creating a history of poor grades and discipline issues. Traditionally, teachers hone in on poor performance to pinpoint and improve weak skills. However, they may overlook the possibility of a student learning disability, leading to student frustration, feelings of inadequacy, and thoughts of leaving school. Lowered self-esteem renders the student's perception of self as helpless and powerless to change the situation. Over time, increased frustration and lower self-esteem continue to dictate misbehaviors in school, leading the student to eventually dropout of school.

The participation-identification model approaches the relationship between the student's behaviors and dropping out from a positive perspective. This model highlights the fact that students who are actively engaged in school will identify positively with school. Based in social control theory, children's identification with school indicates an internalized

belongingness to the school, and they value being successful in their school activities and school related goals. If children bond with the school, then it is expected that misbehaviors will decrease or be non-existent, reducing the likelihood of dropping out of school.

Finn and Rock (1997) studied academic risk and resilience as it relates to engagement behaviors, self-esteem and locus of control in grade 10. A student who exhibits academic risk factors including low socio-economic background but is resilient and holds a positive self-view, a sense of control over life, and is positively engaged in school may overcome those risk factors and succeed in school even if the student is from a low socio-economic background. The results of their study conclude that there are significant differences between resilient and non-resilient students' backgrounds. A majority of resilient students live with both parents, parent educational levels are high school attainment or beyond, and parents' expectations of educational levels for their children exceed high school. Resilient students have a lower incidence of school discipline issues, and higher attendance. Teachers' and students' correlations are similar in the engagement categories of persistence/attending, absent-tardy/trouble, and engage/prepared as surveyed by Finn and Rock. Resilient students are occupied in positive engagement behaviors. Researchers find engagement or disengagement behaviors manifest themselves in the early grades and may be predictive measures for dropping out.

Deviant behavior. The obverse of engagement is deviant behavior. Rumberger and Lim (2008) find deviant behavior can be within school; however, the most prevalent type of deviance is out of school delinquency. Deviant behaviors may begin as early as elementary school and increase the probability of dropping out in high school.

A wide variety of descriptors defines student aberrant behavior in school. Such behaviors as high absenteeism, pregnancy, fighting, damaging property, disrespect for authority, drug use and trafficking, gang affiliation, nonparticipation, low self-esteem, lack of homework and family educational expectations, caring for a family member, and criminal behavior contribute to triggering the decision to drop out. The use of drugs and alcohol is associated with a high dropout rate, and substance use during middle school increases the likelihood of dropping out. Research literature concurs that students who behave badly in school have peers who have similar behaviors and may in fact learn these negative behaviors. “Through contact with others who have dropped out, one not only *learns* of this alternative, but may receive some group support—perhaps even group pressure—for this action” (Finn, 1989, p. 121). These behaviors may be an escape to cover up the frustration and humiliation of school failure and strengthens the possibility of school dropout.

Course credits and interest. The courses students take in high school can have an effect on whether a student remains in school or drops out. Students must take a required number of courses in specific disciplines over their four year tenure in high school. The requirements are usually dictated by the state so that the school can certify a student for graduation. Some students may matriculate in high school for four years but fail to graduate, ie, the non-graduate or non-completer. Non-completers may not have the correct course credits in the areas prescribed by the school or state. Other non-completers may have failed a course just prior to graduation and not made up the credit. In these cases the students are considered dropouts (Menzer & Hampel, 2009). If deficiencies are made up these students may be considered completers. They may complete high school through an alternative program such as a GED (Tyler & Loftrom, 2009).

In *The Silent Epidemic*, Bridgeland et al., (2006) reports that the number one reason teens left school early is because classes are not interesting, as reported by 47% of those surveyed. Bridges et al., (2008) found that students generally have good things to say about their classes with mixed opinions about teaching methodology. They want their classes to be relevant to their lives, which foster engagement with the classroom and teacher, and see how the knowledge gained would be applicable to their future. This does not always happen. Rumberger and Lim (2008) found that many times academically challenging courses have higher quality teachers than those courses with less rigor.

Pregnancy. Teen pregnancy, parenting, and childrearing are coupled with low educational attainment, low wages, and higher rates of poverty and welfare. Female teens who have a child often drop out because they need to care for their child. Fathers also drop out because they must find work to financially support their child. Teen pregnancy and parenting reduce the possibility of graduating from high school and increase the rate of dropping out (Bridges et al., 2008; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Tyler & Loftrom, 2009).

Peer relationships. Peer relationships reviewed in the literature showed mixed results because peer relationships were not measured identically for each study. However, peers can be very influential in school settings, social settings outside of school, and in forming attitudes towards school. Having friends who have a positive outlook about school and behavior decreases the likelihood of dropping out. Social circles who have a negative view of school and glorify delinquent types of behavior, including criminal behavior or peers who have dropped out, increase the possibility of dropping out and not graduating from high school (Bridges et al., 2008). Students are influenced negatively by their peers and are “pulled” out of school.

Employment. Employment during high school may have a link to dropping out of school. Hours at a job take away from homework, family occasions, and leisure time (Bridges et al., 2008). The research finds that students working more than 20 hours per week could be at risk for dropping out of high school. There are mixed reviews about this line of thinking because some research has shown that students working during high school graduate on time or, if they do drop out, graduates as young adults (Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999).

Many students can handle a part-time job during high school. They learn how to juggle school and work, which increases their time management and organizational skills. However, some students leave high school early because they are offered a “good” paying job. They do not see the value of their education and do not understand the consequences of this decision later in life. It is difficult for students to envision the future at this time of their lives and that the “good” paying job now may lead to low employment or no employment as they get older (Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999).

Educational expectations and attitude. As students enter adolescence with all its physical changes and desire to fit in, attitudes about school, career, family, and relationships can change. School performance is affected by developmental changes in beliefs, values, and students searching for their own identities. These life changes may cause some students to get off track for graduation from high school. Students’ educational expectations and parents’ ability to communicate goals do have an influence on getting to graduation. The higher the students’ goals for educational completion and corresponding parental expectations, the less likely they are to drop out of high school (Sacker & Schoon, 2007).

The more a student values the educational process and persists through difficult course work and/or ineffective teachers, the more likely they are to graduate from high school.

A component of this is students' self-perception, self-concept, and self-efficacy. If students believe in their abilities, their academic achievement remains strong, their academic motivation stays high, and their engagement in school is positive. Self-concept, that is, how students think about themselves and their abilities, can be measured as a general attitude, or it can be subject specific. For example, a student who has a high self-concept in math will be positively engaged during math class. Self-esteem, self-perception, and locus of control play into students attitudes about themselves and achievement in school. There have only been a few studies that have that have found any relationship between self-perception and dropping out (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Summary. Reviewing the components of dropping out just from the individual's perspective is daunting and shows the complicated nature of why a student leaves school before graduation. The push of the school and the pull of peers have strong influences on a student who is not positively engaged in school. Life circumstances such as teen pregnancy, the lure of employment and having money at a young age are also powerful factors influencing a student's decision to drop out of high school. Self-esteem, self-perception, and locus of control, interested in school, and personal and family matters may all contribute to a student staying in school or dropping out.

Family. The family is the first teacher of the child. As the child matures, the family is the primary influence on their cognitive and social development. The family influences the relationships the child will have within the family structure as well as with peers and with

teachers in the school. The literature looks closely at the family structure, family resources, and family practices.

Family structure is defined as the number and type of individuals in the home. Two parent families have lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates than single family homes (Alexander et al., 2001). When the family structure changes the economic, emotional and social needs of a child may be affected. If the family structure changes before age four, the change does not appear to affect a significant inclination toward dropping out of high school. However, if the family structure changes during the late middle school years the probability of dropping out of high school increases. Changes in family structure may also increase mobility of the family (Astone & Upchurch, 1994) causing children to lose friends (social capital) and the school to which they are accustomed. The starting over period may cause students to decline academically and cause stress between family members (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). For the student who cannot overcome “starting over” and loses ground academically, dropout rates increase and graduation rates decrease.

Resources directly affect children’s development. Rumberger and Lim (2008) list four types of resources. Financial resources afford a family a better home environment, such as computers, more books, better neighborhoods, better schools, and enriched learning experiences such as summer camps and tutors. Students who come from families with high income are less likely to drop out of high school. Human resources are those resources the parents themselves possess such as their own education status and time spent with children to help them with school work. Sacker and Schoon (2007) support Rumberger and Lim’s research that these factors greatly influence student motivation and educational aspirations.

Students are less likely to drop out of high school the higher their parents' educational level. Confirming the link with parental modeling and expectations, students are more likely to drop out of school if the head of the family has not completed high school.

Social resources are the relationships families have with each other, members of their communities, and the peer and teacher relationships formed in schools. Strong relationships in each of these areas are key to engagement in school and successful graduation with peers. Teacher relationships at school seem to be one of the most important relationships students can have, especially if they are contemplating staying in school or leaving (Croninger & Lee, 2001), which underscores the theoretical frameworks of Hirshi, Tinto, and Engagement Theory.

Risk factors. Croninger and Lee (2001) studied five high school dropout risk factors. They are: 1) lives in a household where the family income is at or below the 1988 poverty threshold; 2) belongs to a language-minority groups; 3) belongs to a disadvantaged-minority group (African American, Hispanic, or Native American); 4) lives in a single-parent household; or 5) has a mother who failed to complete high school (or a father in the case of a male-headed, single-parent household). They found the threat to successful completion of high school increased if a student had more than one risk factor.

Parenting practices. Parenting practices utilize the financial and human resources the parents possess to improve the “development and educational outcomes of children” (Rumberger and Lim, 2008, p. 50). High educational expectations of students by parents lower the dropout rate. The most important parenting practice regarding student success in high school is that of parental expectations for students, especially educational expectations. When economic resources in some families are diminished, parents have less to give to

children and may hold lower educational aspirations for children. In addition, although a parent may have high educational aspirations for children, they have to be around to transmit those aspirations. In non-nuclear families, transmittal may hit a road block.

Astone & McLanahan (1991) studied four parenting practices that have direct effects on dropping out: 1) whether the mother wants the student to graduate from college; 2) whether the mother monitors the student's progress in school; 3) whether the father monitors the student's progress in school; and 4) whether the parents supervise the child (p. 313). Families who have attained educational levels beyond high school regularly verbalize the necessity and expectations of higher education to their children have a great impact on their children completing high school.

Social capital. Coleman (1987, 1988) is the first researcher to introduce the concept of social capital to social theory. He defines social capital as functional, an individual impacted by the social structures around him. "The social capital of the family is the relations between children and parents..." (p. 110). In Coleman's article, *Families and Schools*, (1988), he discusses the changes in American education from the agrarian society in which the parents worked on the farm and schooled their children at home to the evolution of both parents leaving home for the office with children educated in day care facilities and public school, as it is known now. Throughout history, Coleman asserts that the family social capital, that is, family connections and values, has been replaced by the values of society, and family connections have been lost to modern children. Society has moved from the family as the center to institutional welfare where society and corporations are seen as the center of modern life.

Intergenerational closure, a form of social capital, is a family practice in which the parents of a child know their child's peers and their parents. Social capital can have value outside the family and consists of the relationships the family has in the community. When focusing on families, their children's friends, and their friend's parents, intergenerational closure makes connections between parents. If the intergenerational relationships are strong, parents will share values with one another and look out for one another's children. Parental practices of high intergenerational closure will reduce the likelihood of dropping out of high school and graduating at the end of grade 12 (Carbonaro, 1998; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Carbonaro (1998) reports that for each additional friend's parent the child's parents know, that is, high intergenerational closure, the greater the child's chance of completing high school and graduating by a factor of 1.4 as compared to parents with low intergenerational closure. On the other hand, at the other end of the distribution spectrum, students whose parents did not know their child's friends or parents were seven times more likely to drop out of high school and not graduate.

Background. There are a number of characteristics that determine the background of a student as related to dropping out of high school. Demographics, health, and past experiences all play a part in determining reasons for dropping out of high school. Students' values, family, race and gender are important characteristics to consider.

Graduation and dropout rates vary widely when demographics are considered. The most widely studied may be that of gender. Many researchers suggest boys have a greater dropout rate than girls (Alexander et al., 2001; Bowers, 2010). However, based on other characteristics, some studies have shown the opposite. For instance, in reviewing statistics

associated with teen pregnancy and teen parenting, girls have a higher dropout rate than boys (Rumberger, 1987).

Dropout rates differ when considering racial and ethnic minority populations. Lutz (2007) found that there is a “great deal of ethnic variation in dropout among students who identify as Hispanic or Latino. When high school non-completion is examined by ethnicity, Mexican youth tend to experience relatively high rates of dropout, while Cuban and other Latino youth tend to have relatively high rates of high school completion” (p. 330). Dropout rates also differ when reporting gender if the study is conducted in a rural or urban setting, or when an entire sample or simply a sub-sample of the population is studied. When considering immigration status, foreign born 16-24 year olds have a dropout rate of 24% as compared to a 16% dropout rate for those students born in the United States who have foreign born parents (“Child Trends,” 2011). However, third generation Hispanics have a higher dropout rate than first generation immigrant Hispanics. A possible conclusion is that first generation Hispanics had more motivation to succeed in the United States. Second generation Hispanics had a higher graduation rate than third generation Hispanics possibly because the second generation had better English skills than first generation Hispanics, and more motivation and enthusiasm than third generation Hispanics. However, Lutz (2007) finds that low socioeconomic status has the greatest impact on Hispanic students not completing high school, and generation does not make a difference.

Summary. In summary, the individual predictors of dropping out of high school are numerous. The family, as the central influence on students’ development and attitudes regarding the importance of school, sets the value of education in the home by communicating the support for education and sharing with their children their educational

hopes and aspirations for them. Over time, the educational system has moved from an at home educational system to the public school system as it is today. The influences of family have eroded for many students and have been replaced by societal and corporate values, such as single parent families, daycare, and a lack of intergenerational closure. The intergenerational closure, families knowing each other and their children's friends may make a positive difference.

Students who enter school with positive self-esteem are shown to be more successful and resilient. However, for those who encounter problems in school, engagement in the school process decreases and in-school misbehaviors develop. Gender, race, especially among Hispanic and African-American students, immigration into the United States, and language proficiency are all obstacles that may increase dropping out of high school. Out-of-school behaviors may lead to negative influences by peers and additional deviant behaviors. Researchers have found that dropout indicator behaviors can be identified as early as third grade, and this is the time to make a difference in a child's life.

Institutional predictors. While individual students are growing and developing their own set of values, attitudes, and goals, these constructs are influenced by the institutions and structures around them. Values, attitudes and goals are not formed in a vacuum. This idea is highlighted in the discussion both in the literature and qualitative research of this study of deviant behavior and the influence of friends upon an individual student. For many years, educators and social scientists focused on the individual student dropout without scrutinizing the bigger picture to help explain some of the root causes for dropping out of high school. Current research literature, however, includes a deeper look at the institutional predictors that influence a student to drop out of high school. The institutional factors considered in this

review are the school and the community (Ferdig, 2010; Rumberger & Lim, 2008) and represent the “push” influence on students to drop out of high school.

School influences. Without doubt, schools exert strong influences on students’ attitudes, values, and goals, affecting their achievement and interest in school. While family structure, resources, and practices play their part in supporting the student in the school environment, the neighborhood school as well as state and national education agencies, play important roles in determining whether a student remains in school, drops out, or graduates. Five types of school characteristics, which influence student performance, drop out and graduation rates are influential: 1) exclusion (Stearns & Glennie, 2006), 2) student composition, 3) resources, 4) structural characteristics, and, 5) processes and practices (Rumberger & Lim, 2008, p. 53).

The terms “pull” and “push” or implicit and explicit exclusion describe the environment schools create and students perceive when students are in the process of dropping out (Lee & Breen, 2007). Individual students are pulled out of school by influences such as family, finances, and friends. Students are pushed out of school when school policies or practices do not allow them to succeed in school (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). For instance, when students fail exit exams and have no chance for any academic recovery, students drop out (Bridges et al., 2008; Gallagher, 2002).

Student composition and resources. School environment and school climate are determined by a number of characteristics. School environment and climate give a school its personality. A positive school climate supports students in their academic performance while a negative school climate can hinder many hard working students and lead to a high dropout rate. The social composition of the school, including student demographics, influences the

school's character and affects the academic performance. Schools whose students have high socioeconomic status (SES), may have better teachers which leads to higher performance. Students may be peer tutors, motivating each other toward academic achievement (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). The correlation between SES and school resources is evident in the literature—the higher the SES of the school's neighborhood, the better the resources. Resources may support student engagement and integration within the school (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

The research literature identifies five characteristics of student composition which have effects on school dropout rates. They are: mean SES (Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000); the proportion of at-risk students (Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000); the proportion of racial or linguistic minorities (Rumberger, 1995; Sander, 2001) the proportion of students who changed schools or residences (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Sander, 2001); and, the proportion of students from non-traditional families (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

School structure. There is debate as to whether school structure actually affects dropout rates. In the meta-analysis of studies, Rumberger and Lim (2008) review a number of studies that analyze dropout rates and the location of a school in an urban or rural setting. The results are mixed. In another set of studies, the relationship between high school size and the dropout rate is examined. Again, the results are mixed.

Processes and practices. Managerial practices at the teacher level (Bryk & Thum, 1989), such as classroom discipline, oversight of the curriculum, and in-service training, have an inverse effect on dropout rates while overly strong principal leadership can have a direct

effect on dropout rates. When school policies prevent students from excelling, such as lack of credit recovery and exit exams, dropout rates increase.

Public versus private school dropout rates. One structural feature that is debated in the literature is the issue of public versus private schools. Private schools include Catholic, other religious and non-religious schools. In a number of studies at the middle school level, no difference in dropout rates are found. However, at the high school level Catholic schools have lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). This may be due to the community concept fostered in many Catholic schools and the fact that Catholic schools are independent of many state and federal mandates. Traditionally, a strong sense of discipline combined with the advantage of determining who stays in the school and who leaves creates a lower dropout rate. Bryk and Thum (1989) report results indicating lower dropout rates in Catholic schools because these schools have better internal organization and the students experience a structured academic program as opposed to the “shopping mall” curriculum of the public schools. The commonality of the curricular program bonds students and students, as well as students and teachers in an atmosphere that emphasizes academic excellence. Students who leave a Catholic school likely enroll in a public school before dropping out. However, the literature shows that students have a better chance of graduating when enrolled in a Catholic high school. In her study, Lutz (2007) finds that students in Catholic schools have a greater high school graduation rate than the public schools or non-public, private schools.

Public schools many not be able to control the admission of students as private schools can. Budget monies, the buildings or settings in which classes are taught, or the size of the school are often beyond administrators’ control; however, they can control how all

these things are managed. No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) is an attempt to strategize how the curriculum can be improved, how teaching and learning can be effective, and how professional development for teachers can focus on the success of each child.

Instructional design and school policies. Social Control Theory and Engagement Theory both address the underlying structural deficits in the educational system which NCLB tries to fix. In online education, using design elements such as the development of transactional distance and social presence may improve achievement and keep students engaged in coursework. Transactional distance and social presence are part of the social capital construct, and may be the most important practice a school can muster. If there is a strong tie between students and teachers, student engagement will increase and the dropout rate may be reduced. However, without these ties, school or district policies may inadvertently push students out the school door and into the dropout category.

Policies underlying the instructional design that do not allow for low grades, poor attendance, or misbehavior abandons students and creates the perception of having no chance for recovery, resulting in higher dropout rates. The student is pushed out of school and becomes a dropout statistic (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Worrell & Hale, 2001).

School curriculum rigor studies show an effect on dropout rates. Dropout rates diminish in schools that have a strong academic climate, with more students in an academic track than vocational studies and where students report having hours of homework (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Mandatory or compulsory education laws in many states affect the dropout rate (Dianda, 2008). Many states have a compulsory education age of 16 or 17. This age limit suggests that students do not have to stay in high school until graduation. Bridgeland et al.

(2008) suggest raising the compulsory education age to 18. New Mexico's state compulsory education age is 18 unless the student has graduated with a high school diploma or received a GED.

Many states have a high school exit exam. Some studies have shown no effect on dropout rates while others demonstrate that students who cannot pass the exit exam simply dropout of school earlier than senior year. These "pushed out" students are often low-achieving and disadvantaged students. From the school's perspective, this helps the school achieve a better graduation rate. It appears that the graduation rate has increased and schools are doing a better job, but the dropout rate has actually increased (Tyler & Loftrom, 2009).

Summary. Schools have an impact on the student. The structure of the school, the student composition, school management, rigor of curriculum and relationships among the faculty and students will determine if the student completes a high school diploma or drops out. The push and pull effect of school policies regarding absentee rates, failing grades, or misbehavior create the perception that students cannot recover and remain in school to graduate. However, teachers who use design elements such as transactional distance and social presence in the traditional or online classes and develop a strong, rigorous curriculum may improve student engagement and decrease dropout rates.

Communities. Communities and community characteristics help shape the development of adolescents. The institutional resources in a community, such as medical facilities, child care, and employment opportunities, affect life in the community. Parental relationships provide connections to friends in the neighborhood. Social capital, or social connections, to help supervise and monitor children are part of the shared value system of the community (Coleman, 1987, 1988; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). The makeup of the

community affects the dropout rate. In neighborhoods comprised of people holding white-collar jobs, children have access to more resources such as medical facilities, libraries and positive role models. Parents have greater wealth to provide extracurricular activities for children. Educational expectations are high for their children, and the parents are able to help with homework and activities. Students are engaged in learning with the support of parents and graduate from high school on time. Students living in neighborhoods with high poverty, low incomes, high crime rates and high unemployment are at risk for dropping out of high school. Personal safety may be a concern for these students. Parents are not able to help them with tutoring or afterschool projects because they may not have the education needed, or they may be working when the students are home. Communities can help decrease the dropout rate by offering jobs for students after school or during the summer months (Rumberger & Lim, 1998).

Three researchers, (Telleen, Maher, & Pesce, 2003), found communities have come together to strategize how to make their community a safer and more enriching place for children. Some of the activities that have been put into place are after school programs which give students a safe place to be, tutoring, career guidance, and health and violence education. Parent programs provide parent education about schools to increase attendance and graduation rates, and they provide affordable child care for teen parents to facilitate returning to school. For younger students, summer recreational programs were initiated to prevent gang intervention and initiation, to make positive friends, and develop relationships with law enforcement officers. One community wrote a grant to bring in health experts to the schools. At the high school level, to keep teens off the streets and out of trouble in the

community, truant students were targeted for interventions, and plans for an aggressive attendance contract were developed.

Summary. Communities play a larger role than most would expect in the area of high school dropout. When a community works to provide safe and meaningful activities for its children the community, environment changes and the community as a whole becomes healthier. Community programs that include schools create, in effect, an all year education opportunity and send a message to students that education and positive support are available for their success and the health of the community. Low economics of a neighborhood affect the dropout rate negatively; whereas, neighborhoods with an abundance of resources for students, such as medical facilities, libraries, and jobs, positively impact the graduate rate.

Predictors for Dropping Out of College in Online Programs

Because this study examines adult students returning to high school in an online program, it is reasonable to review the literature that addresses dropping out of online programs. Since the literature does not review adult dropouts in online high school programs, it is appropriate to review the predictors or reasons why adults drop out of online programs in the post-secondary realm.

One of the greatest concerns for online learning at the college level is the very high dropout rate. Dropout rates may be indicative of student satisfaction or dissatisfaction with course delivery (Munro, 1988). For this study, satisfaction is defined as success factors. Some researchers estimate dropout rates as high as 70% and others as low as 10% (Frankola, 2001; Henke & Russum, 2001; Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008; Prasad, 1998; Thompson, 1997; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Each of these studies is reported from a different setting. Some may be from an educational setting, face-to-face, or online while others are reported from a

corporate perspective, again some face-to-face classroom setting and others online. It is unclear if rates are realistic or highly exaggerated. The problem with measuring dropout rates at the post-secondary level is that colleges and universities do not define the dropout rate in the same manner (Woodley, 2004). Each college or university defines a dropout student in their own way. A standard definition does not exist. Some may consider a student a dropout after the add/drop period while others consider a student a dropout if they have not enrolled for three semesters. There are more definitions in between such as the student is considered a dropout if the first online assignment is not turned in. Therefore, research results on dropouts from one university to another cannot be generalized.

Student. Galusha (1997) separated dropout predictors into three categories: student, faculty, and institution. Adult students have many different concerns about being in school compared to high school students. Adults not savvy in technology or who have been out of school for years may have insecurities about returning to school, particularly to an online program. Special attention must be given to first time online learners, so they become technologically adept. It may mean that the school provides a preparatory program for these students on use of the technology in the online degree setting. Students may be insecure about financial concerns of tuition and books, disruption in family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers.

Online students may also worry about the lack of feedback from the teacher because the learning environment is different than the traditional face-to-face classroom. Lack of communication from the teacher is likely to cause students to dropout. Isolation from the traditional learning situation is a cause of concern for many adults. They may perceive a lack of support from or inaccessibility to the teacher or tutors or technical assistants as isolating

factors. Many online adult students do not feel part of the community and develop feelings of isolation and alienation which may lead to dropping out. The distance aspect of online coursework may take away the positive feeling of community found in the traditional classroom (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Jun, 2005; Kember, 1989; Sherry, 1996).

Thompson (1997) reports the top six reasons for dropping out of an online course are: work commitments, family commitments, study commitments, insufficient time, ill health, and study load. He describes the adult student in an online course as usually a person who may be married, has children, and may work full time. The time commitments of returning to school may be too much for the student and results in course withdrawal or dropping out of school.

Tyler-Smith (2006) reveals that students describe their reasons for dropping out as lack of personal motivation, poor instructional course design, conflicts between study, family, and work, or they learned what they needed to know. Some students attend classes for personal learning goals for specific information. Once they obtain the information they want, they leave or drop out of the school. Others move away or transfer to another institution to complete their educational goal and are considered drop outs by the university they have left.

Tyler-Smith (2006) continues describing the reasons students dropout as those who withdraw early in the course before ever turning in an assignment. Their first impressions of online learning may not be the best and results in the student dropping out. Making sure the students are technically ready for online learning and that the course is well designed may lead to better first impressions and student retention online. Some students experience

cognitive overload in an online course, causing them to become anxious and stressed. They lose confidence in their ability to succeed and dropout.

Faculty. Faculty professional development is essential in lowering the dropout rate in secondary online courses (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Galusha, 1997; Sherry, 1996). The lack of faculty training or experience in teaching online classes may increase the dropout rate in colleges. Because an online course takes more time and preparation, the faculty member who has agreed to teach online must be enthusiastic about this medium, enjoy the challenges of online education, and support online coursework as an effective educational alternative. Faculty must be provided with training to teach an online course, especially in the area of instructional design. Poor course design causes confusion or boredom, and lead to students dropping out. Additionally, the teacher must have the appropriate technology hardware to conduct the course.

Institution. Sherry (1996) advocates that the institution itself must support the online program with funding, appropriate technology, and professional development for the teachers. If teachers agree to teach online, they must be assured that tenure will not be threatened. Because online education takes up more time than traditional classroom teaching, stipends or other rewards are recommended. Quality teacher interaction online is an influencing factor for students to remain in the online class and not dropout.

Summary. In summary, the adult online learner has many challenges when taking an online course. Challenges such as self-regulated learning, motivation, technical readiness and communication with the instructor lie with the student.

The online teacher and institution must communicate to students meaningful feedback and impart a sense of belonging which encourages course completion and retention in the program.

High Schools Endeavors to Reduce Dropout Rates

In an effort to reduce dropout rates, many high schools have implemented programs to retain students. Bridgeland et al. (2008) discuss the virtues of service learning in the schools. The fact that students can engage in relevant and real time service learning projects helps to keep their interest in school and maintains high attendance rates, motivating some students to remain in school and graduate.

McNeal (1995) and Sacker and Schoon (2007) report that student participation and confidence in extracurricular activities helps to retain students in school. Those students who participate in athletic programs have a significantly greater chance to graduate. Those students who participate in fine arts programs have an increased chance to graduate but not as significant as those involved in athletics.

The curricular structure of schools has changed to address the dropout problem. Some efforts to retain students include downsizing schools, stepped up monitoring and mentoring of students, school-within-a-school models, career academies, and adding career and technical classes to the curriculum. Talent Development High Schools have reorganized schools into small learning communities with a rigorous English and math curriculum. Dropout prevention programs are numerous, some with success and many not rigorously evaluated.

Second chance programs are those such as the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) program. The GED program is controversial. Should schools count GED holders as

graduates or just completers? Counting them as graduates can add money to the coffers of schools. The worth of a GED certificate is controversial in regard to its academic equivalency to a high school diploma as well as its worth in the labor market (Tyler & Loftrom, 2009).

Lunenburg (1999) reviews four dropout interventions. When used in combination these interventions may make a strong program to reduce dropout rates and the social and economic problems created by high school dropouts. The four programs Lunenburg suggests include a community based organization (CBO), a case management intervention, a school-within-a school (SWS) program, and negative sanction policies. CBO's are collaborative between the school and community agencies. The agencies may provide health services to students, outreach to ensure that parents attend school meetings with teachers, guidance and counseling services for students and families, or alternative educational programs such as academic and social support programming. Case management interventions consist of academic assistance, social services, employment services, and a computerized database resource file. Using teachers and counselors, students receive extra academic tutoring, address issues that interfere with educational goals, social skill development, and learning crisis resolution techniques. Students are offered short and long term employment opportunities. The database lists numerous services available to them within the community. Using the general curriculum, SWS programs have smaller classes in which teachers, working in teams, use teaching strategies to help at-risk students. The negative sanction policies intervention holds parents and students accountable for school attendance. If students do not attend regularly, family welfare support can be reduced, or the student will

not be allowed to get a driver's license, or the license of those students who are already driving can be revoked.

There are dire consequences for dropping out of high school both for the individual and for the economic and intellectual health of the United States. Taking this into consideration, the NCLB Act was signed into law to ensure that all children would receive education that would meet their needs and raise the graduation rates (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2001).

High schools have been reorganized permitting collaborative, cooperative, and constructivist learning, the number of grade levels in schools have been readjusted to enhance relationships with peers and teachers, curriculum revisions have been made to differentiate instruction, side-by-side schools and schools-within-schools have been formed, professional learning communities have been created, and professional development for teachers has been stepped up. Additionally, some schools have increased monitoring of grades, absenteeism, and parent contact. Targeting at-risk student minorities such as African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans has been studied to determine and meet their special learning needs. Schools tried many other solutions for at-risk students such as engaging students in afterschool and community service activities, athletics and music programs (Alspaugh, 1998; Bridgeland et al., 2008). State education agencies and the educational institutions themselves reviewed their own programs to make changes regarding length of day, number of days, credits required for graduation, credit recovery opportunities and exit exams.

Summary. Schools are concerned about dropout rates, increasing retention, and the mandates of NCLB to improve classroom rigor, achievement, and graduation rates. Schools

are mindful that they must change and introduce or strengthen programs in place that will address retention. A high school diploma is preferred to a GED in the labor market and college admissions office. In both the literature and study interviews, the GED suffers from the controversy of real equivalency with a high school diploma.

Characteristics of Adult Students Returning to School

Adult students in college are generally considered to be over 24 years old. This older group of students is acknowledged as “nontraditional” by many post-secondary schools. However, that picture is changing with the admission of many over 24 year olds enrolling in classes for various reasons. The nontraditional label is fading, yet this group of students because of their age and life journey, has special characteristics as a group, particularly regarding teaching and learning (Jinkens, 2009; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Ross-Gordon (2011) describes adult students in general as having one or more of the following characteristics:

- ✓ Entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school.
- ✓ Having dependents.
- ✓ Being a single parent.
- ✓ Being employed full time.
- ✓ Being financially independent.
- ✓ Attending part time.
- ✓ Not having a high school diploma (p.26).

In addition, life spans are longer and adult children/students may be dealing with aging parents.

Adult students are juggling multiple roles in their lives, including: worker, spouse, parent, and caretaker. While these roles may be assets to their learning, they may also be distracters and present challenges for students to finish classes. Many adult students consider themselves workers first and students second (Ross-Gordon, 2011) which works to their detriment when trying to finish a college program.

Adults return to school for a variety of reasons. They may be looking for self-satisfaction to complete a school program, whether it is high school or college, and they hope to provide a positive role model for family (Goldman & Bradley, 1996; Kinser & Deitchman, 2007-2008). Adult students may be looking for better employment opportunities or advanced education for promotion reasons in order to overcome limited economic resources (Goldman & Bradley, 1996).

Kolstad and Kaufman's (1989) study found that the longer students stayed in high school, the greater their chances of returning to school. The greater the negative experience in high school, the longer it takes for a student to return to school, if ever (Cocklin, 1990; Goldman & Bradley, 1996). The adult student who returns to school "exhibits higher levels of socio-economic status, intellectual ability, motivation and self-esteem than other dropouts" (Goldman & Bradley, 1996; Kolstad & Kaufman, 1989). Adult students returning to school are usually highly motivated and enthusiastic. However, some research contradicts this notion. Kolstad and Kaufman (1989) indicate that motivation dulls when students, overwhelmed by their studies, find the academics too difficult, or when other adult responsibilities, such as work or child care, become the priority.

Adult learners often re-enter college with vast life experiences unlike most students who begin college just after high school graduation. They have matured in their outlook on

life and their educational expectations and goals. Adult learners do not want to be treated as children but respected as adults (Cercone, 2008; Cocklin, 1990). Adult students are self-directed learners and autonomous in their learning. Their experiences bring resources to enrich the class. Adult students are ready to learn and want to see the immediate applicability of their learning to their everyday lives and careers. Adults are driven internally to learn and succeed in classes for their own self-satisfaction, job satisfaction, or self-esteem and quality of life (Cercone, 2008). Adult learners tend to be self-reflective and prefer experiential learning. They have an internal locus of control which directs their learning. Finally, they tend to be constructivist, transformative learners (Cercone, 2008) which allow them to make sense of the world in light of their own experiences.

Ross-Gordon (2011) suggests the response from post-secondary schools to meet the needs of adult learners is to evaluate prior life and work experiences and give credit where appropriate. Instructional designers and teachers, if aware of these experiences, create class activities to enhance the learning of the adult student. Using assignments that are collaborative (Jinkens, 2009) and encourage students to take control of their learning, helps to increase learner satisfaction. Challenging adult students' assumptions about the world fosters critical thinking (Ross-Gordon, 2011). For some adult students, extra mentorship from teachers and enhancing study skills are needed (Kennedy, 2005).

There are implications for adult online learning. Cercone (2008) asserts that adult characteristics are the instructional considerations that must be attended to for online instruction. It is up to the teacher to "learn how to provide a positive 'social' environment using an electronic medium" (p. 152) by becoming aware of adult learning characteristics and educational goals.

Online Education and Virtual Schools as a Means to Complete High School Online Education

As technology and computer use advanced in the 1980s, online education entered the academic scene. At this time, this was considered an atypical way of getting an education, but historically, it was part of the evolution of distance education from the days of correspondence courses by mail (Moore and Kearsley, 2005). Online education, like correspondence courses, became an alternative method for achieving academic goals for those who could not get to a campus because of work and travel demands, disabilities, illness, lack of transportation, or by adult students who wanted to take classes for personal or professional reasons (Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008; Mupinga, 2005; Prasad, 1998). Many adult students are married and have children. Online education allows them to be attentive to their family obligations and eliminates the struggle of finding child care several times a week in order to attend traditional classrooms. In other words, online education allows adult students flexibility of time (Barcelona, 2009; Mupinga, 2005).

Online education has become prevalent even at traditional brick and mortar colleges and universities around the world. No longer is it considered an outlier but rather a viable alternative to face-to-face education for many students. It affords college students the anytime, anyplace method of education. If students have a computer and access to the Internet, they have access to courses from universities internationally.

Courses may take two forms: blended learning or virtual learning. Teachers use blended learning to enhance a face-to-face class by assigning readings, threaded discussions, or group activities online. The students may turn in assignments using email and take

quizzes and tests through the online platform used for the class (Maddux, 2004; Mupinga, 2005). Virtual learning takes place using the Internet solely in an electronic environment.

Online education has evolved quickly. Students, teachers, and institutions alike have learned how to participate in and improve online education so that this method of education is productive, viable, and creditable for all. Teachers are initiating innovative online instructional design and creative new approaches to learning. The positive unintended consequences affect teaching in a face-to-face environment where teachers have used online techniques to improve traditional classroom instruction. Learners are acquiring new skills to be successful online students. Successful online students are self-disciplined and can initiate their own learning and problem solving. They hone their organizational and study skills to be adept at online learning. Students learn that online education is student centered, using collaborative and constructivist approaches. Teachers use email, blogs, wikis, and discussion threads to supplement activities in online coursework and to engage the students, so that they feel they are in a classroom community.

What was once looked at with much skepticism and as a doubtful learning platform from teachers' perspectives is now education as usual. Web-based education is no longer the outlier but is becoming a normal course of higher education teaching and learning. Taking a course online is becoming second nature to many college students who often supplement their traditional schedule with online courses to complete their college coursework. "In the industrial age, we go to school. In the information age, school can come to us. This is the message implicit in the media and movement of distance education" (Barron, 1989, p. 28). Online education began at the post-secondary level, but it has only been since the 1990s that online education has become part of the high school program (Roblyer & Davis, 2006).

Teachers at the secondary level led the way by integrating technology into traditional classrooms and blending the advantages of these best practices to enhance learning.

Summary. With the introduction of technology to education, online programs became the next step in distance education. Being able to access a course online opened education to the masses. It reduced many of the adult learners' struggles to access higher education such as work constraints, child care, and long distance travel to the campus. Online education allowed learning to take place on a flexible schedule, anytime, anywhere. Online education has evolved at a fast pace. In the beginning, skepticism about the quality of education pervaded educational institutions, but as universities realized they needed to move into the 21st century and retain and increase student populations, they joined the information age. At the secondary level, teachers are integrating technology into classroom using a blended model of instruction.

Virtual Schools. Virtual schools are programs that offer traditional and advanced high school course work at a distance to high school age students. Clark (2001) defines a virtual high school as "an educational organization that offers K-12 courses through Internet- or Web-based methods" (p. 8). Virtual schools are created by state legislatures and usually run by state agencies. Their funding comes from state appropriations or grants, and they may receive federal or private foundation grants. Sometimes students are charged a small fee to help cover the operating expenses (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2010). Virtual schools fill the need for high school students and some middle school students. Some offerings of online learning opportunities are available to students in 48 states and Washington, D. C. However, "no state offers a full range of online learning opportunities—supplemental and full-time options for all students at all grade levels" (p. 6). The first two

virtual schools were created in 1997. They are the Virtual High School (VHS) and the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) (Barbour & Reeves, 2009).

Virtual high schools have sprung onto the secondary educational scene quickly. In 1997, only two virtual schools were in existence. Clark (2001) reported that by 2000 virtual schools existed in three states--Florida, New Mexico, and Utah--with three more being planned in Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan. In his 2001 report, Clark states that the number of virtual schools grew to fourteen states with an enrollment of 40,000 to 50,000 students, which is supported by Barbour and Reeves (2009) in their study. At the time of this writing, virtual schools of various sizes exist in 39 states. Virtual schools are represented by a number of institutional structures, such as multi-district virtual schools, single-district full-time schools, consortium programs, and programs run by post-secondary institutions, in addition to state run virtual schools. Some virtual schools are as small as 2,500 course enrollments, that is, one student taking one semester-long course. Florida Virtual School (FLVS), the oldest virtual school program in the nation has over 213,000 course enrollments. Together virtual schools in the United States reported over 450,000 enrollments in the 2009-2010 school year (Watson et al., 2010). To understand and appreciate the popularity of the virtual schools, FLVS and North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS), the second oldest program, had an increase in enrollment of nearly 40% over the previous school year. Of all the virtual schools, FLVS and NCVPS garnered 96% of the enrollment growth in the 2009-2010 school year (Watson et al., 2010).

Some virtual schools offer full time options for students such as FLVS, but this is rare (Watson et al., 2010). Most offer supplemental options for students in conjunction with students' regular high school enrollment. FLVS and Missouri Virtual Instruction Program

offer elementary courses, but this is an anomaly among virtual schools at this time. Virtual education is popular for those students who want to enhance their curricular program or for students whose schools do not offer a class they want, such as honors or Advanced Placement courses and modern languages. Students turn to virtual schools when they have failed a class and need credit recovery or for students who are ill, disabled, homebound, or have disciplinary problems in a face-to-face school (Ferdig, 2010; Roblyer & Davis, 2006).

Many virtual schools do not make judgments about the rigor or quality of the online courses. Their role is to evaluate the student's work by giving a grade and report the grade earned in their classes. The student's district or full time school posts grades to transcripts and evaluates the quality of the course (Watson et al., 2010).

Objections continue to surface about the political or philosophical nature of virtual schools whether they are socially desirable, morally acceptable (cheating), and credible, and whether they should continue to be funded and certified because the teacher is not in the same room as the students. As with online programs in post-secondary education, virtual schools have more challenges than the political and philosophical debates. There appears to be a high dropout rate—as high as 60% to 70% in some virtual schools, which confirms the beliefs of virtual school skeptics that virtual schooling is not appropriate for most students (Roblyer, 2009; Hawkins & Barbour, 2010).

The differing percentages of reported dropout rates in virtual schools are due to the fact that, like post-secondary education, the trial period for students to determine if they are a good match for an online class varies from program to program. Trial periods can run from one day to 185 days. The average trial period is fourteen days (Hawkins & Barbour, 2010). The dropout rate also depends on the age of the program, the funding, instructional quality,

teacher staffing, technical support, and the diversity of the student body (Roblyer & Davis, 2006). Like post-secondary education, there is no common method of calculating the dropout rate.

A similar situation exists in determining course completion rates. Virtual schools base completion on different criteria. For some virtual schools receiving a grade of A, B, C, D, or F defines course completion. In other virtual schools receiving a *passing* grade, i.e., A to D-, is defined as course completion (Hawkins & Barbour, 2010). Hawkins and Barbour found course completion definitions reported as “remaining in the course regardless of the grade to passing the course with an A- or better” (p. 14). The categories they found for definitions were: 1) completing the course in a specified timeframe; 2) finishing the course with a passing grade; and 3) relying on the judgment of the brick and mortar school the student physically attends (p. 14) This uneven system makes it difficult to compare the quality and results of one virtual school to another.

However, some virtual schools have higher completion rates and post grades that are better than traditional classroom grades. In Roblyer’s (2006) study, five directors of high-quality virtual schools were interviewed regarding the success secrets of their programs. Judging school and quality of program falls into four categories: 1) teachers are trained to teach online and have needed resources; 2) the content of the curriculum is designed so that it is interactive and of high quality; 3) the programs provided technical assistance and ensure that the student work is secure on the website; and 4) assessment is included and procedures are delineated so students are monitored during testing (p. 33).

Programs have different success rates due to three factors: 1) the majority of students are highly motivated students (70% to 80%) or credit recovery students; 2) a factor that

affects the success rates of virtual programs depends on when and how the dropout rates are calculated; and 3) starting a program is challenging—start-up fees and resources for curriculum design, implementation, and starting the program are substantial and not easily accessible.

Roblyer continues to explain the five common strategies for successful programs and achieving low dropout rates that the directors shared: 1) prepare the students for success by assessing their skills, working through an online orientation, and determining a drop date that gives students adequate time to know if they like the online environment; 2) prepare teachers for success by training them to teach in an online environment; 3) use interactive, flexible course design with interactive team activities; 4) monitor and support each teacher such as telephoning each parent and each student once per month so that teachers can focus on teaching and not solely on instructional design; 5) monitor and support students by interacting with each student individually, making student success the focus of all activities (p. 33-36). Similar criteria are found to be related to success factors in post-secondary online courses.

For this research, the virtual school under study in New Mexico is IDEAL-NM (Innovative Digital Education and Learning-New Mexico), created by the state legislature, under the supervision of and funded by both the Higher Education Department (HED) and the Public Education Department (PED). IDEAL-NM provides online education for college level students, high school students, work force training, and government employees. This virtual school is the only one in the country to service such a wide range of clients.

A new program, under the aegis of IDEAL-NM started in August 2010. Graduate New Mexico was implemented to bring back 10,000 New Mexico high school dropouts to

high school to complete course work and earn a high school diploma. The program is an online program in an asynchronous format. Funding for this program was set for two years, but when the program opened, funding was cut to one year. In March 2011 funding was stopped, and no new enrollments were taken. Students in the program were allowed to complete their classes without being able to re-enroll whether they had completed requirements for a diploma or not.

Summary. Virtual high schools are schools that offer only online education for high school students. They are new to the scene of education, introduced in the late 1990s. Over time, many state legislatures have mandated and funded virtual schools. Like post-secondary education, virtual high schools have been the subject of debate regarding quality and rigor education. New Mexico's virtual school is IDEAL-NM and provides educational courses to a number of customers, which is unique among states. This study will focus on the Graduate New Mexico (GNM) program, which offers high school courses leading to a high school diploma for adult students who have dropped out of high school. The GNM program stopped taking new enrollments and continuing enrollments in March 2011.

Characteristics of the Online Learner

Online learning has its challenges for the student, and not every student is a good candidate for online education (Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008; Mupinga, 2005). Students need pre-assessment for preparation and readiness for online learning before registering for an online course and a strategy to help them become viable online learners (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008). This is evidenced by the fact that post-secondary online education has a high dropout rate (Frankola, 2001; Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008; Prasad, 1998).

Many successful online learners are self-directed, motivated, confident about learning and using computers, have high GPAs, and have had prior successful online courses, which keeps them coming back for more (Goldman & Bradley, 1996). For many working adults, they have access to a computer and the Internet, either at home or work. Employers are often supportive of their efforts at continuing education and may give them time to study at work or time off to study at home. Milligan & Buckenmeyer (2008) describe the successful online learner as 1) independent and actively motivated to learn; 2) enjoys working independently; 3) skillful in structuring and managing study time around other responsibilities; and 4) have excellent verbal and written communication skills (p. 450).

Student must be self-regulated learners, comfortable with a learner centered approach, comfortable with technology and willing to work to create higher order thinking using constructivist and collaborative learning techniques. They must value the freedom and flexibility that online learning gives them with the self-discipline to complete the course (Summers, Waignadt, & Whittaker, 2005). The use of email, reflective discussions, chat sites to share ideas, and problem based learning projects are in line with the principles of adult education and prepares students for a global knowledge based world (Budden, 2009; Fish & Gill, 2009; Milam, Voorhees, & Bedard-Voorhees, 2004; Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008).

Students who drop out of college online courses do so for a variety of reasons and at different points in their coursework. Schedule and time constraints, family and work obligations, technology issues, lack of support from family or employers, course and cognitive overload are a few of the reasons students give for dropping out of online classes (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Frankola, 2001; Henke & Russum, 2001; Jun, 2005; Milligan &

Buckenmeyer, 2008; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Thompson, 1997; Thornburgh, 2006; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Many students enter an online course unprepared technologically or think that an online course is easier than a traditional classroom course only to be overwhelmed and discouraged at the amount of work it takes to complete an online course. Some feel very isolated especially since they cannot see their classmates or their teacher and have little contact with the teacher (Gunawardena & Zittel, 1997).

Student Expectations of the Teacher

Students have expectations of their online teacher and academic experience, such as easy access and navigation of the website, timely return of assignments, and the ability to communicate with the teacher. Low transactional distance and high levels of social presence and teacher immediacy lead to student satisfaction with the course and the instructor, as well as better grades (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2003; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Oliver, Osborne, & Brady, 2009; Richardson & Swan, 2003). Meeting their expectations leads to students' satisfaction, which is paramount to students completing courses. In addition, the ease with which students can access the course site and use the tools of the course website is key to learner outcomes and course satisfaction. Motivation will decrease if students have difficulty accessing the site. If students have an initial positive experience in the online setting, it is likely that they will return for more online classes. Perceived ease of use and satisfaction with the online environment, specifically between the first and second online classes, appears to solidify the continuance of online classes (Arbaugh, 2004).

Summary. Online learning is not for every student at either the secondary or post-secondary levels. Online learners must be motivated, self-directed learners. Successful students are comfortable using computers and can work alone without the feelings of

isolation overtaking them. Online teachers must create collaborative learning activities online to reduce the feelings of isolation and create a community of online learners. Students can become overwhelmed by the experience of online learning and dropout if they are technologically unprepared and unable to complete large amounts of work on their own, and perceive that they not given support by teachers, employers, or family. Learner satisfaction, ie, success, is high when the technology and tools are easy to access and use, teacher support and technology support are readily available, and teacher immediacy creates a supportive relationship for the online learner.

Student Satisfaction Factors in Online Education at the Post-Secondary Level

Student satisfaction is a complex notion that addresses a number of factors in the literature. For this study student satisfaction is defined as student success factors. Student satisfaction in the literature is addressed at the post-secondary and graduate level settings from the perspective of the student regarding self, the instructor, peers, course content, and technology. No literature was found regarding student satisfaction or success at the secondary level. This study will help to expand the literature by finding success factors in asynchronous online education in an adult dropout population taking high school courses for diploma recovery.

There are many factors listed in the literature that define student satisfaction or student success. Beqiri and Chase (2010) discuss structural factors that lead to student satisfaction and success. Online education can be a “just-in-time” solution for many in the working world and at the graduate level to further their education in the immediate moment without having to wait for a traditional semester to begin their education. Other factors include flexibility of scheduling study time around home and job obligations and flexibility

in the content delivery and the learning process. Those in the workforce remain at their employment and continue to be productive without leaving to go to a class, and students can manage their time efficiently for study. Song et al. (2004) concurred with similar findings that student success meant students did not have to consume large amounts of time for travel to campus, and the anytime, anywhere nature of online education is a great asset for student success.

Moore and Kearsley (2005) discuss online design factors that lead to student success and categorize them as student-content, student-instructor, and student-student interactions. Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1994) extended these categories, adding student-technology interface.

The student's interaction with the content of the course in online education moves the student from being a receiver of information and the teacher as the center of the lesson to the student becoming active in his own learning with the teacher's role as guide or facilitator (Beqiri & Chase, 2010). Student success factors in the teacher interaction category includes: a posted syllabus, orientation to the course and website, clarity of assignments (that is, the students have clear instructions for assignment completion and they know what to do), assignment due dates, course calendar, rubrics for grading, and instructions to locate materials, extra information, and examples (Palmer & Holt, 2009; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011). The amount of interaction with the content and study time may determine success in the class, but Brown and Liedholm (2004) remind online instructors that time allocation to online classes is also affected by other things such as work, leisure activities, and other courses. Beqiri and Chase (2010) found that if students like their online class, perceive the content of their online class to be useable in other classes or the work setting,

and if students have some background in the course content before they start the class, they are likely to be well satisfied and successful in their classes.

Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) discuss social presence as an important factor in student-instructor interaction. The social presence speaks to the lines of communication that are opened between student and instructor and developing a nurturing and caring relationship. In an online course, student interaction with and support by the instructor is essential for the student to achieve success and is one of the most significant factors leading to student success (Gunawardena and Zittel, 1997). Students must have easy access to instructions and know how to connect with the instructor when they have questions (Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis, & Lopez, 2011). Interaction and support are design and organizational elements of an online course. Coupled with social presence and student-instructor interaction is the Theory of Transactional Distance defined as structuring of dialogue between the student and the instructor to support student success and build a positive relationship between student and instructor (Moore & Kearsley (2005).

Transactional distance and student-instructor dialogue enjoy an inverse relationship. Moore and Kearsley (2005) cite a study by Chen and Willits (1999) finding “that the greater the Transactional Distance between instructor and learner, the students perceived their learning outcomes lower” (p. 232). Knowing that the instructor is active in the class and cares about the students’ learning is important for success. “Faculty who are successful in the online learning environment are those who e-mail their students frequently, respond to e-mail messages promptly, hold regular online and traditional office hours, and develop personal touches in the online environment” (Jackson, Jones, & Rodriguez, 2010). Instructors who establish, maintain, and nurture professional relationships with students increase student

satisfaction and success (Kupczynski, Mundy, & Jones, 2011; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011).

Quality instructor performance has an impact on student satisfaction and success. Instructor performance means providing effective instruction, being prepared to use the technology of the learning management system, and providing timely and meaningful feedback in addition to dialogue (Beqiri & Chase, 2010; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011). Constructive comments on assignments are helpful to raise learning outcomes, improve student performance and increase their satisfaction. Answering questions, grading assignments and posting the grades in a timely manner helps students to monitor their progress and adjust their study skills to finish a course successfully, increasing satisfaction (Jackson et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011). Mullen and Tallent-Runnels (2006) find similar results in students when the instructor's performance includes answering questions, giving constructive feedback, and providing relevant resources. They find that giving both academic and affective support and encouragement motivated students to do well and supported positive satisfaction and success.

Students interacting with other students in an online course have several advantages, and this interaction increases student success. Activities that are designed to increase student interactions help to bond students and develop Communities of Inquiry (CoI). CoI's allow students to work together to uncover and create knowledge and complete group assignments (Joo, Lim, & Kim, 2011). The social interaction between students and the group can serve academic and well as nonacademic purposes such as organizing projects, listening skills, peer evaluation exercises, threaded conversations, offering encouragement to each other, and solving personal issues (Lee et al., 2011). Lee et al. (2011) find student-student interaction

may enhance peer tutoring, peer teaching, group project completion and encourage peers to answer questions and form study groups, reducing the feeling of isolation while online. Peer support in online environments is essential to positive satisfaction and increased learning outcomes (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Muilenburg and Berge (2005) find that the lack of social interaction is the greatest barrier to course satisfaction and success.

The student-technology interface forwarded by Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1997) states that students have a working relationship with the technology being used in the online course and this interface is just as important as the previously discussed interfaces. Smart and Cappel (2006), Muilenburg and Berge (2005), and Song et al. (2004) determine that prior experiences and familiarity with the technology used in the online course increases course satisfaction and success. Song et al. (2004) find that students like the various technology tools used in the online courses, such as chat, email, and bulletin boards.

There are other factors that lead to online success that may not fit into the above categories. These are student-institutional interactions. As mentioned previously, educational institutions play a part in student success in online programs. These interactions are varied, yet important to the student. Institutional factors that help students become successful include face-to-face counseling, library access, orientation to online learning classes, and ease of admission, registration, course catalogs and course schedules (Lee et al., 2011). It is the institution that provides the technology to teach online courses and instructors and students, alike, must be prepared and supported in these efforts through online course orientation and instructor professional development and technical support to increase success (Hollis & Madill, 2006; Palmer & Holt, 2009). While the factors listed above qualitatively indicate that they lead to success, a final category, student-self interaction,

also influences satisfaction, yet seems to be individually internalized. This factor must be strong or become highly developed within the student for the student to reach high satisfaction and success in an online course. Student self-efficacy, problem solving and overcoming obstacles, committing to and being motivated to complete the course, persistence, prioritizing time and assignments, self-pacing, developing an internal locus of control, high grade expectations, and becoming an active and independent, self-directed learner are significant characteristics demonstrating student satisfaction and identifying success factors (Hollis & Madill, 2006; Joo et al., 2011; Kupczynski et al., 2011; Upton, 2006).

Song et al. (2004) find challenges and barriers to online education users. Participants in the study report difficulties such as the “lack of communication, difficulty understanding instructional goals” (p.66), as well as technical problems. Knowing where to obtain technical support and the ease of connecting with the support are crucial elements to online satisfaction and course success (Lee et al., 2011).

Summary. Although the literature on student satisfaction addresses the college level student, it is important to identify those success factors because this study addresses many college age students who have not finished high school. It is significant to compare the GNM students’ satisfaction and success with those satisfaction and success factors described in the literature. Specifically, the literature focuses on student interactions with the course content, instructors, peers, technology, and self. Technical access and technology problems are the main problems that challenge course satisfaction and course success. Knowing where to obtain technical support and the ease of connecting with the support are crucial elements to online satisfaction and course success (Lee et al., 2011).

Method

There are significant differences between quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research works from a research design of testing a theory or hypothesis, with operationally bound and defined independent and dependent variables, with concerns of reliability or validity and with a minimal degree of interpretation of the data. On the other hand, the most important elements of qualitative design are the centrality of interpretation and the experiential relationship between the variables with the independent variables developing in unexpected ways (Stake, 1995). Research questions are designed to elicit reflective information and may be changed or even replaced in mid-study as new issues emerge, so the researcher may make a “vigorous interpretation”... and “draw conclusions in the end” (p. 9). Stake (1995) discusses the major differences between quantitative and qualitative research as “1) the distinction between explanation and understanding as the purpose of inquiry; 2) the distinction between a personal and impersonal role for the researcher and 3) a distinction between knowledge discovered and knowledge constructed... The difference between quantitative and qualitative research is not just the data but “searching for causes versus searching for happenings. Quantitative researchers have pressed for explanation and control; qualitative researchers have pressed for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists” (p. 37). Qualitative researchers include uniqueness of the individual or outliers in data as important parts of the data collection to understand the meaning of the phenomenon; quantitative researchers treat uniqueness as errors in data and may discard this information in the final data analysis.

Qualitative research may be approached from a number of traditions (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2006b; Merriam, 1998). Several approaches are most common: case

study, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, bibliography, and a basic or generic approach (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Because each tradition has a differentiated focus, the design of the study accommodates the tradition. The researcher designs the process and research questions to elicit the information sought.

Although there are a number of qualitative research traditions, each with its own characteristic focus, there are some common characteristics that all qualitative researchers follow. These characteristics are the common threads that run through each tradition or type of qualitative research. First, qualitative research is a method used to understand an event or phenomenon from the participant's perspective, *emic*, rather than from the researcher's perspective, *etic* (Merriam, 1998, p. 6-7). A key assumption of qualitative research is that information is constructed individually. Second, the researcher becomes the instrument for data collection and analysis rather than using a survey or another quantitative instrument. This enables the data collector to adapt or change to accommodate changing circumstances as needed. Third, qualitative research many times involves many hours of fieldwork. Each participant in this study was interviewed about the phenomenon of dropping out of school, their decision to complete their diploma, and their experience in an online program. Fourth, qualitative research is inductive work, meaning that out of the data collection and analysis come theories or hypotheses instead of the research testing a theory or hypothesis as in quantitative research. Fifth, the research focuses on thick, rich description. The context of the analysis uses the words of the participant with direct quotes to describe a phenomenon instead of numbers (Merriam, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Creswell (2009) adds to the list of characteristics. Using multiple sources of data increases the rigor and understanding of the study such as exit surveys or transcripts. In this

study interviews with persons from differing levels within the program such as students, teachers and administrators will be invited to participate to increase rigor. The qualitative research design is emergent and flexible. The original design may change as information unfolds; the interview questions may change, or sites visited may be added, all in order to get the best understanding of the phenomenon. “Qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry in which the researchers make an interpretation” (p. 176) of the data collected. Participants and researchers make interpretations in which differing views of the phenomenon emerge. Using a holistic approach to interpretation, the researcher attempts to develop and analyze a complex picture of the study (Creswell, 2009).

A basic qualitative research design (Merriam, 1998) was implemented using in-depth, open-ended interviews. By using this method, participants shared their stories about their dropout experience from high school and their decision to return to complete their diploma in an online setting. In this way the participants told their story. The story is important to understand the participants’ life journey in their context. Each story is a personal story; multiple realities will exist. The stories were reviewed for information addressing each question and the researcher analyzed the narration to ultimately answer the research questions. After the questions were answered, the data was reviewed for emergent themes not addressed by the research questions.

When the interview was complete the participants were thanked for their time and effort in this research project. The researcher mailed a token of appreciation in the form of a \$25.00 gift card to each participant. The interview was transcribed immediately and data analysis began. Notes taken during the interview were checked against the transcript for consistency or needed clarification from the participants.

Chapter III

Research Design and Method

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors related to success that helped returning high school dropout students complete online classes and earn a high school diploma. Success is defined as the factors leading to course completion moving a student toward a high school diploma. Using a qualitative research design, I sought to explore and understand the adult students' educational journey from dropping out of traditional high school to re-establishing themselves as students in an online program, and finally, completing a high school diploma.

Research Questions

The three main research questions and sub-questions are:

- 1.0 What were the factors that led students to drop out of high school?
- 2.0 What factors led students to return to high school?
 - 2.1 What factors prompted drop out students to return for a high school diploma program online instead of returning to a face-to-face high school class?
- 3.0 What factors do high school dropouts returning to school believe will help them complete an online course in a high school diploma completion program?
 - 3.1 What resources will help students successfully complete an online program?
 - 3.2 What factors of the online program will help students succeed when compared to their former high school educational experience?
 - 3.3 What are the challenges and barriers to course completion?

The research questions for this study explored the reasons the student-participants dropped out of high school, their life experiences impacted by this decision, their reasons for

returning to school in an online learning environment, and the factors that have helped them to complete an online course. The research asked student- participants to compare their experience in a face-to-face class environment with the online experience in which they were currently engaged. A qualitative research design and an interview method of inquiry was the best way to understand in depth the meaning of each student-participant's experience in their educational journey. Because each student-participant's story was unique, multiple realities and perceptions emerged. Using transcripts of each interview, I identified those realities, determined if there may be comparable meanings in each story, and ultimately identified those analogous factors that led adult students to successfully complete online classes in pursuit of their high school diploma.

Rationale for a Qualitative Research Design

As a researcher, I wanted to understand each student-participant's story from the reasons for dropping out of high school to enrollment in a Graduate New Mexico course. For this reason, a basic qualitative research design was used to "simply seek to discover and understand" (Merriam, 1998, p. 11) the events the student-participants experienced. This study sought to figure out how the world operated in the life of an adult without a high school diploma who returned to an online high school program and the factors that made this experience successful.

Matching the research design and inquiry method with the study's purpose, the research questions, and the resources available is paramount to any qualitative study (Patton, 1990). Choosing a qualitative research design for this study was based on several factors which were worthy decisions to pursue a qualitative design (Patton, 1998). First, the nature of the research questions for this study necessitated a description of the educational context

as students participate in the Graduate New Mexico (GNM) program. Second, the Graduate New Mexico program is fertile ground for exploration because it was a new and unique program for adults completing high school. Third, a qualitative study allowed for detailed descriptions from the perspective of the student-participants. Fourth, using a qualitative approach allowed me to become involved not only as the instrument of data collection, attempting to understand students who dropout and their decision to return to high school in an online program, but also to report my findings as an “*active learner* who can tell the story from the participants’ view rather than as an ‘expert’ who passes judgment on the participants” (p. 18). In other words, “to understand and explain” (Patton, 2002, p. 215).

I sought to explore as much information about the Graduate New Mexico program as possible through the student-participants’ experiences, in order “to get at the nature of reality” (Patton, 2002, p. 215). Stake (1995) calls this “experiential understanding” with the aim of “seeking understanding of the human experience” (p. 38). Although this program was young and short-lived, student-participants had an educational experience while in the program. They told their stories about their experiences, coupled with their dropout background and the impact this event had on their lives and their decisions to take online courses through GNM. To mine the depth and understand the significance of their stories, the information gathering process could not constrict relaying their experiences in any way. The information was allowed to emerge naturally without preconceived hypothesis testing, using an inductive approach to determine the factors related to success in the Graduate New Mexico program. Patton (1990) stated that “one of the strengths of qualitative methods is the inductive, naturalistic inquiry strategy of approaching a setting without predetermined hypothesis” (p.85).

A qualitative research design using interviews as the method of inquiry allowed an open-ended, conversational, flexible and emergent inquiry which “communicates respect...by making *their* ideas and opinions (stated in their own words) the important data source” (Patton, 1990, p. 124). Lincoln and Guba (1985) contributed to this discussion by not only stressing the emergent characteristic of qualitative design but added that qualitative research “increases the scope or range of data exposed...as well as the likelihood that the full array of multiple realities will be uncovered” (p. 40). Interviews allowed me to discover those multiple realities and find out what I could not directly observe, that is, feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and the way people organize the meaning of their experiences and make sense of the world (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). The student-participants had a voice that took into account their unique circumstances and did not just count them as a number. For this study, a qualitative research design using interviews was appropriate.

Sample selection. I utilized nonrandom and purposeful sampling in this study which is commonly used in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61).

To be included in the sample, selection criteria had to be met that reflected the purpose of the study and identified student-participants who were information rich (Merriam, 1998). Because the goal of the study was to learn as much information about student-participants’ experience in the Graduate New Mexico program, I purposefully selected a sample that was intimately familiar with the Graduate New Mexico program. For this study, each participant had first-hand experience with the GNM program as a student, administrator

or teacher. This created a sample of participants who were representative of and were information-rich about the event under study (Patton, 1990 2002).

The participants in this study were derived from the Graduate New Mexico (GNM) program. The attributes for this purposeful sample were the criterion each participant must meet. In this case, to qualify to participate, student participants:

- ✓ Did not graduate from high school.
- ✓ Must be or have been enrolled in the GNM program.
- ✓ Be at least 18 years of age.

These criteria described many of the students who are enrolled in the GNM program. Because this group of student-participants is already formed and accessible, it is convenient to invite them to participate in this study as discussed by Fraenkel & Wallen (2009) in their observations on sampling.

The criteria for teachers to participate in this sample are:

- ✓ The teacher had to be a full-time teacher in the GNM program.
- ✓ The teacher had to have taught at least one semester in the GNM program.
- ✓ The teacher supervised more than one GNM student.
- ✓ The teacher was a licensed teacher in the State of New Mexico.

The criteria for administrators to participate in this sample are:

- ✓ The administrator oversaw the teachers and students in the GNM program.
- ✓ The administrator had direct supervision of and input to the GNM program.
- ✓ The administrator had communication with GNM students.

Participants

In this study, three levels of participants were interviewed: students in the GNM program, teachers in the GNM program, and the administrators of the GNM program. I interviewed 23 student-participants, three full-time GNM teachers, and two GNM administrators for this study.

Patton (1990) stated that qualitative research generally used small sample numbers, sometimes $n = 1$. Creswell (1998) discussed the number of participants in a qualitative study. He asserted different numbers for different types of qualitative designs. Creswell cited studies that have as few as one participant to as many as 325. Lincoln and Guba (1985) cited research stating that the “population is almost never possible to define or designate” (p. 233) and the researcher used the best technique available to gain sample size.

Patton (1990) summed it up when he wrote about sample size:

It depends. There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with the available time and resources (p. 184).

Triangulation in qualitative studies was essential so that the information gathered could be studied from multiple sources to “confirm the emerging findings (Merriam, 1998). Interviewing student-participants, teachers and administrators garnered information from three different sources within the GNM program. This allowed me to make interpretations that were credible by exploring consistencies and inconsistencies, similarities and differences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Recruitment and Consent to Interview

All students who were currently enrolled or had been previously enrolled in the GNM program were sent an email inviting them to participate in a study of the GNM program. Because I was not authorized to have the students' personal contact information, this email letter was sent out by one of the administrators of the GNM program. If the students chose to participate they were instructed in the invitation to email me at a private email address with their telephone number. In this way none of the administrators or teachers employed by IDEAL-NM or the GNM program knew who was participating and the confidentiality and anonymity of the student-participants was protected.

I created a separate Google email account that was only be used for the responses by student-participants. When I received an email expressing a willingness to participate, I contacted the student-participant by telephone or email to discuss the research purpose, interview questions, and consent to participate form. If the student-participant agreed to continue with the interview, the process to obtain signed consent forms (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) began through email, by fax, or United States Postal Service (USPS) mail. As soon as the signed consent forms were obtained, I signed the forms and sent a copy by USPS to the interviewee.

The telephone interview was selected as the preferred method for this study because it was the most convenient and direct way to connect with the student-participants. A date and time for the interview was determined and implemented. The anonymity of the telephone may have helped student-participants who would have been hesitant to speak face-to-face. This method of interview may have elicited more information or different kinds of information because of its anonymous nature. The GNM program is a statewide program.

Using the telephone alleviated the distance issue for some participants and me to connect in a face-to-face meeting. The student-participants received a \$25.00 gift card for their participation in this research.

I personally asked all the teachers in the GNM program for an interview. All teachers agreed to be interviewed. The consent forms were signed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and the teacher received a signed copy of the consent. The teacher interviews were conducted face-to-face. The GNM teachers interacted only with GNM students. Each teacher received a \$25.00 gift card at the end of the interview.

I personally asked the GNM administrators for an interview. They agreed to be interviewed. The consent forms were signed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and the administrators received a copy of the consent. The administrator interviews were conducted face-to-face. The administrators not only interacted with the GNM students and program but with other IDEAL-NM programs. Each administrator received a \$25.00 gift card at the end of the interview.

Teachers and administrators were interviewed face-to-face because they were all local residents and readily accessible to me unlike the students who lived throughout the State of New Mexico.

This research study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (Li & Irby) at the University of New Mexico, Protocol #10-609.

The interview protocol questions and process. The questions for the student-participants, teachers, and administrators were open ended so that the interviewee responded freely. The student-participants had a different set of questions than the teachers and administrators. The student-participant questions asked the student-participants to discuss

the reasons for dropping out of high school, the impact dropping out made on their lives, the reasons for enrolling in the GNM program, online readiness for coursework, obstacles and challenges faced, and the factors related to their success in their GNM courses. These questions were central to finding answers to the research questions. The teachers and administrators were asked questions regarding their philosophy of education, their perceptions of dropout students, observations of students' readiness for online education, their observations of the student-participants' online experiences, the challenges and obstacles their students faced, and the strengths and weaknesses of the Graduate New Mexico program. Even though the teachers and administrators were asked different questions the information elicited dovetailed with the student-participants shared information. The student-participants were the center of attention for this study. It is their information that answered the research questions. The information collected from teachers and administrators shed light on their position as the educators in the dropouts' lives and their interaction with the dropout students in GNM. From their vantage point the questions teachers and administrators were asked revealed administrative infrastructure strengths and weaknesses in the GNM program which student-participants did not have access to and were factors that impacted the success of students.

The questions were formatted in an interview guide with a heading noting the date, interviewee name, gender, and pseudonym of the interviewee for the student-participants and date and interviewee name for the teachers and administrators (See Appendix A and Appendix B). An interview guide was useful to make sure that all areas of interest were covered during the interview and that all interviewees were asked the same questions (Merriam, 1998). Patton (2002) continued with these same ideas to say that an interview

guide makes use of time efficiently. If additional probing or clarifying questions were asked during the interview, I wrote them on the interview guide. There was space between questions on the interview guide so that notes and quotes could be written as the interview continued.

The student-participants gave permission for the interviews to be recorded. The interviews were recorded using a small digital recorder next to the telephone. This insured that the interviewees' perspectives were captured as fully and fairly as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002) and are "preserved for analysis (Merriam, 1998). Notes insured that the interview was not lost in case the recording system malfunctioned (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).

An audit trail was created documenting the date of each email sent, each telephone conversation with the student-participant and each mailing sent out or received. After each interview, I recorded notes describing in writing any impressions of the interviewee or anomalies that happened during the interview that would distort the flow of or skew the information elicited from the interviewee.

The interview questions were based on the research questions and were open-ended so that the views and reflections of the participants were elicited without any perceived barriers to the response. The interview itself was conversational in nature, so questions could be worded for the participant's understanding so that each discussion yielded the most in-depth information possible (Patton, 2002). Based on the participants' responses, probing and clarifying questions were asked, such as, "Tell me more about this" or "When did that happen?" (Patton, 2002). I recorded and transcribed all interviews.

Data Analysis

I adopted Creswell's (2009) six steps in my approach to data analysis. Creswell directs researchers to a multi-step process of organizing and analyzing data, finding the deeper meanings of the data, showing the data, and interpreting the data. His six steps to data analysis are: 1) organize and prepare the data; 2) read through all the data; 3) code the data; 4) use the codes to determine categories and themes; 5) determine how the categories and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative; and, 6) make an interpretation of the data for meaning. He also discussed the final report in a number of ways, one of which is a basic qualitative analysis, which reflects this study's design. In this research, the analyzed data revealed the factors related to success and were reported in narrative style along with any other additional findings.

My first steps in this process were to transcribe the interview and begin an audit trail (Merriam, 1998) about how the interview evolved, noting any observations, impressions or interruptions during the interview. Each student-participants interviewee was assigned a pseudonym. Data analysis began with reading the first interview transcript for content familiarity. Notes were taken on the transcripts to organize categories of information. While I read transcripts I continued interviews (Creswell, 2009). "The right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it *simultaneously* [emphasis original] with data collection" (Merriam, 1998, p. 162).

I read each transcript several times to become very familiar with the data and to glean the major categories, success factors, and find any additional information (Marshall & Rossman, 2006a). This gave me a general sense of what each participant revealed and allowed me to reflect on the shared story. I read the transcripts in two ways. First,

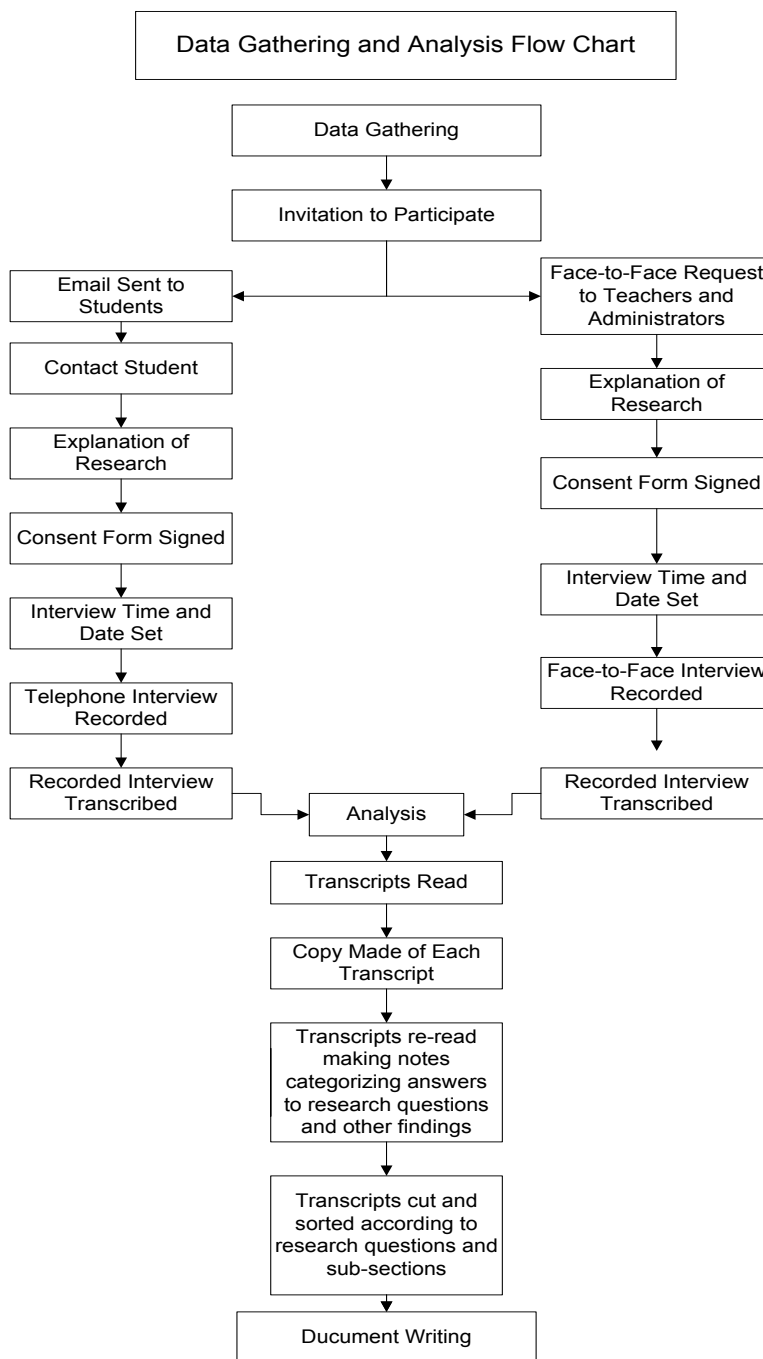
administrator, teacher, and student-participant transcripts, were read with accompanying notes on the transcripts documenting unique perspectives of each interviewee, while looking for emerging categories to answer each research question, find factors of success, and identify any additional information. Second, I read the transcripts to compare and contrast the categories, factors of success, and additional information. After I read the transcripts, I cut the transcripts apart, sorted like comments together to help reduce the data into groups that were similar to answer each research question (Merriam, 1998). This activity helped me consider the data more analytically (Marshall & Rossman, 2006a).

Defining categories and sub-categories was my next step to reduce the data. Merriam (1998) presents a thorough discussion of categorization. Categories should reflect the purpose of the study, and be exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent (p. 183-184). Lincoln and Guba (1985) described categories as being internally consistent and mutually exclusive, meaning the items in each category were consistent with one another while the items in another category were exclusive of the first category and did not overlap. Creswell (2009), as well, provided sound guidance to determining categories. Once I had a general sense of the data, I continued to sort the categories to chunk similar material. The categories were correlated with the research questions. This reduced the data to manageable pieces of information to answer the research questions and discover any other additional information not anticipated.

I used the categories as the major findings of the data analysis and determined sub-categories, using direct quotes from the student-participants' interviews to substantiate the findings.

The final analysis and interpretation of the data answered the research questions. To answer the research questions I asked myself “What is the significance of what I heard the interviewees say?” and “What are the lessons learned from this study?” I also looked at meanings derived from the findings in the data collected compared to the findings in the literature, offering interpretations (Marshall & Rossman, 2006a). This substantiated the findings of the study as well as determined implications and suggested questions for future research which are discussed in Chapter V.

Chart 1 shows the step by step process I used for recruitment of both students and administrators and teachers for this research as well as the steps of the interview process, data collection, and data analysis in preparation for writing this document.

Chart 1. Summary of recruitment, data gathering, and data analysis

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was infused in this study by establishing rigor in the data and findings by meeting the criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). To create credibility, I used triangulation of subjects to collect interviews from student-participants, teachers, and administrators of the GNM program, member checks of transcripts for accuracy of meaning, and consults with the dissertation chair regarding analysis. I developed a thick, rich description of the dropouts' life experiences using their words regarding online education to attain their high school diploma. Credibility may be established by triangulation. Denzin (1978) as cited in Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested triangulation may be established by multiple sources, methods, investigators, or theories. "Multiple sources" may be *multiple* copies of one *type* of source, such as interview respondents" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I sent the transcript of each interview to each interviewee, asking that the interview be reviewed for accuracy, that is, a member check. Member checks refer to taking the data collected from each interviewee back to each person and checking the data for correctness. Merriam (1998) suggests member checks as a method of creating credibility. The interviewees were asked to review the transcript and add or edit the comments they shared in the interview to make sure the point made was adequately articulated. No one responded with comments or changes.

Because the nature of qualitative research was to describe the multiple realities of the participants' perceptions at the time of the interview, the findings may be transferable only to similar programs, but unlikely. I provided the "thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), p. 316). In addition, by describing the characteristics of the GNM program, I provided others with an additional basis on which to determine "typicality" (p. 211) to make comparisons of their own situation to determine

the likelihood of transferability. It would be doubtful that the results of this study would be identical with a different group of students. Using quotations from all participants, I provided findings based only on this group. My position was to describe the information and interpret insights by the participants as I understand the interviewee's perspective. In my role as a qualitative researcher I was concerned with bringing forth multiple realities, specific to the participants and context studied, and understanding the world as they experienced it. Lincoln and Guba (1985) found that evidence of empirical studies, such as qualitative research, hold true for only the participants and context of the situation. Any transferability was dependent on the population and situation by the next researcher (Merriam, 1998). Following then, dependability was not about the replication of a study, but about the results making sense and being consistent, supported by use of transcripts and audit trails, and perhaps being useful or engendering further study from the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). "A researcher wishes outsiders to concur that, given the data collected the results make sense—they are consistent and dependable. The questions then is not whether findings will be found again but *whether the results are consistent with the data collected* [italics original]" (Merriam, 1998).

Role of the Researcher

The essential characteristics of qualitative research were "the goal of eliciting understanding and meaning, the researcher as primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the use of fieldwork, an inductive orientation to analysis, and findings that are richly descriptive" (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). I became the instrument of data collection and analysis by interviewing all the participants, responding to the context by probing answers for understanding and clarity of the participant's experience. I actively

listened to the participants' stories, asking additional questions for my understanding. My role was that of an "active learner who can tell the story from the participant's view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants" (Creswell, 1998). As I listened to each story, multiple realities were revealed which were derived from each student-participants' and teachers' and administrators' experience relative to their life experiences. It was my role to interpret their stories and their realities to find the factors related to success in re-entering high school in an online environment and the influence dropping out of high school years before had on the identified success factors. As the interpreter of the data, I found a number of factors I interpreted as related to success for the student-participants.

I interpreted the findings from my own experiences and perspectives as described in the following. I have 27 years of experience in the field of education as a teacher, school counselor, and school administrator. I hold a Bachelor of Arts degree in Biology with a teaching license in New Mexico and several other states. I also hold a Master's degree in Education and school counseling with licenses in counseling from New Mexico, a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) certificate from the Therapy and Practice Board of the State of New Mexico, and I am a National Certified Counselor (NCC) credentialed by the National Board of Certified Counselors with additional professional affiliations. To qualify as a school administrator, I earned an Educational Specialist (EdS) endorsement from the University of New Mexico and hold an instructional leaders educational license from the State of New Mexico. Each of these licenses and certifications demands practitioners uphold a code of ethics, especially when it comes to the relationship with the participant and the physical and emotional care of the participant. With this background experience, I was

confident that if emotional stress surfaces, I would be able to deal with the situation in an empathetic manner, being careful not to skew information forthcoming from the participant.

My experience in schools and working with children ranged from Kindergarten through grade 12. As an insider to education, I have worked with children as a teacher in both public and private school settings. My teaching experiences have been in regular classroom settings with regular education students and some inclusionary students with special education needs in grades six through nine in both public and private schools in the United States. I had a two-year experience teaching English as a Second Language in a private Catholic Japanese school in Tokyo, Japan, grade 9 through grade 12 within my career. My counseling experiences included a similar population in grades Kindergarten through grade 12 in both public and private schools. As an administrator my experiences were isolated to a private Catholic high school working with students in grades 9 through 12 and their parents.

As an outsider to the field of special populations of at-risk and dropout students, I do not have any experience teaching, counseling, or administering programs with dropout populations or adult populations. My bias is that all students should receive a high school diploma by working within the educational system that serves them best. Schools must do everything in their power to help students in all life situations attain a high school diploma and not blame the student. As I came into this study, my bias was also that my perceptions of dropouts were students who do not care about their education and may be troubled teens raging against the system and just did not want to fit in or cooperate with the educational system. Because of these biases my interpretation of the findings could be affected. It was sometimes difficult during interviews to be quiet with thoughts of “why didn’t you just get

along” with the school and do your work. I had to be careful not to interject any comment that would shut down or give the student-participant any feeling that I held a negative perspective regarding drop out students in my role as researcher.

I currently hold the office of Principal at a private school in the Albuquerque, New Mexico area. There is always a concern about how much a researcher should disclose personally and professionally in qualitative research. Some types of information could skew or curtail the information sought. Since my background was in education at numerous levels, this in itself may conjure up memories or feelings in the participant that would impede or limit the information elicited for the research. It was my decision, if asked by the participant, to disclose my current profession and share with the student-participant that I was a graduate, doctoral student at the University of New Mexico carrying out research for the doctoral degree in partnership with IDEAL-NM. For this study my primary role was that of a UNM student conducting graduate level research rather than a principal in a private high school.

Summary

The purpose of this study was focused on finding the factors that related to success in an online program for adult students completing a high school course of study in order to earn a high school diploma. Using a basic qualitative design and method of inquiry utilizing interviews of student-participants, teachers, and administrators of the GNM program, these subjects were interviewed to learn their perspective regarding factors that make the program successful. An interview protocol was used, adding clarifying and probing questions as new thoughts were brought to the forefront by the student-participants. As a researcher, I was the collector of the data and the interpreter of the findings. My role in education was as a teacher in private and public schools, a school counselor, and currently as an administrator in a

private school. I worked with gifted and regular education students as well as English as a Second Language students overseas. I have not worked with at-risk or drop out populations.

The IRB at the University of New Mexico approved this study.

Chapter IV

The Findings

The purpose of this research was to determine those factors related to success completing online high school courses for adult high school dropouts. The target population studied was high school dropout students 18 years old and older in the Graduate New Mexico (GNM) program, an online program leading to the completion of secondary school requirements to earn a high school diploma. Chapter IV reviews the finding of the research. This chapter opens with the life stories of four of the student-participants to give the reader a wide description of the population under study and an over-view of the student-participants in this study. The teachers and administrators are introduced using their philosophies of education and outlining their perceptions of dropout students. Each research question was answered supported by direct quotes from the student-participants, GNM teachers, and GNM administrators. The chapter closes with a discussion of additional findings that emerged that were not addressed by the research questions.

Research Questions

Three main questions and four sub-questions guided this study. The questions provided background to the student-participants, instructors, and administrators as well as addressing their experiences in dropping out and in the online classes while enrolled in the GNM program. The main research questions and sub-questions were:

1.0 What were the factors that led students to drop out of high school?

2.0 What factors led students to return to high school?

2.1 What factors prompted drop out students to return for a high school diploma program online instead of returning to a face-to-face high school class?

3.0 What factors do high school dropouts returning to school believe will help them complete an online course in a high school diploma completion program?

3.1 What resources will help students successfully complete an online program?

3.2 What factors of the online program will help students succeed when compared to their former high school educational experience?

3.3 What are the challenges and barriers to course completion?

The goal of this research was to answer the research questions. Using the research questions, this chapter reports the results of the student-participants' life experiences of dropping out, their progress through their diploma recovery coursework and identified factors related to success in online class experiences. Research question categories and factors overlapped in some areas. In some cases it was challenging to determine in which category the ideas expressed belonged, because the information was interconnected. In every interview, student-participants talked about the reasons they dropped out, the impact of their decision to drop out, their need to improve their lives through education, their desires and goals for themselves, and their experiences with the GNM program.

Using a qualitative design and interviews as the method of inquiry twenty-eight interviews were collected and transcribed over a four month period. Two administrators, three full-time GNM instructors, which represented 100% at the local level in each category, and 23 GNM students from across the State of New Mexico, were interviewed. Using an interview protocol to guide the interviews, the participants told their life stories from the time they dropped out of high school to their experiences in the GNM program. The administrators shared their educational philosophies, their perceptions of a dropout student and backgrounds giving perspective to their approach with dropout students. They shared

their experiences working with the students in the GNM program. At the time of the interviews some students had completed coursework while others were actively engaged in working on courses. Of those interviewed only four students had completed requirements for a diploma and graduated. One student obtained a GED.

Quotations were used to support the results and findings from students, instructors, and administrators. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of each student-participant to insure confidentiality. Because the administrator and teacher participants were small (N=5) they could be identified. Therefore, pseudonyms, gender identification, and subjects taught were not used to insure anonymity and confidentiality. They are referred to simply as “administrator” or “teacher” without delineation among them.

The Participants

Four stories from student-participants. During the interviews I heard many stories that described the plight of the high school dropout, the impact on their lives of leaving school early, and their reasons for enrollment in and experiences in the GNM program. While participants had their own stories, some elements of the stories overlapped while others did not. Highlighting a few of the participants’ stories demonstrates the commonalities and differences in this wide-ranging population. The student-participants were not cookie cutter or stereotypical of one another. The stories reveal that reasons for dropping out of school are incredibly different and can strike anyone, sometimes without much warning, thought of the future, or discernment. In addition, their stories emphasized their desire to change their lives, develop their skills, and continue to move on to better themselves. They found that opportunity in the GNM program.

Juan: anxiety issues. Juan was a 19 year old young man who dropped out of high school in his senior year. During his junior year, Juan did not want to go to school “because of the people.” He felt uncomfortable around them and began missing days. Juan was unsure of the reasons he felt uncomfortable and was unable to pinpoint an exact reason. After Juan left school, his father decided it was time for counseling. He was diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and obsessive compulsive disorder and was prescribed medication to relieve these symptoms.

Juan returned to high school at the beginning of his senior year. He chose to go to a different high school where most of his friends were attending. But, similar feelings erupted.

I decided to go to another school...And I started going then 'cause all my friends were there, so that's why I wanted to go there. But it ended up being different, and everyone was different because I hadn't been there for the past three years...so all my friends were different and everything was different. I stopped going after like a month around there...It was probably because I thought everyone would look at me and judge me and stuff. Probably that and I felt uncomfortable being around people and my insecurities are not that great and my confidence...I was going through a depression, and I had really bad anxiety. I had obsessive compulsive disorder.

Juan left school about one month into his senior year.

Juan's friends urged him to return to school the second semester, but he knew “it was like kind of late, I won't graduate with you guys.” Juan spent his time away from school playing online video games, exercising, and taking care of his infant sister while his parents worked, anything to combat his boredom. He wanted to go back to school and earn a diploma, not a GED. He tried to enroll in one of the charter schools but was told that school was full. A semester passed, and “I decided I needed to do something, so I got a caseworker, and she started really helping me a lot. She told me about Graduate New Mexico... I started taking online classes after that.” Getting a job was difficult, but the caseworker was able to

assist Juan and helped him get a job stocking, cashiering, and doing “recovery”, that is, “I get to clean up the store.”

At the time of the interview, Juan was matriculating through his last two GNM classes and had about two weeks to complete his studies. He was motivated to complete his classes because he had received scholarship money for college. Juan was looking forward to earning his diploma and moving on to the local community college.

Verna: four children. Verna was 21 years old and had four children, all under the age of five years old. By the beginning of her senior year, Verna was pregnant with her second child. “I was just so tired all the time. And, I felt like I couldn’t really do it. I couldn’t even concentrate as much.” Her parents were taking care of her first child for eight months because the father of this child had left her. Verna left school when she was starting her senior year.

Verna experienced a move to Utah with her family for a few months and enrolled in a GED program but moved back to New Mexico without finishing. She enrolled in a local GED class, which was a face to face class in the morning. She switched to evening classes thinking this schedule would work better for her family. When she enrolled in this program, Verna signed a mandatory contract stating that if she missed ten days of class she must withdraw and would not be eligible to return to the program for a year. She was due with her fourth child, missed classes, and was automatically withdrawn.

Verna was supported by her fiancé at the time of interview. Finances were good when he was working, but he worked seasonal labor jobs. He shared her plight—he was not a high school graduate either. Verna has a strong desire to improve her quality of life.

I stay at home, and that's all I do. I don't have a vehicle around here to get stuff done here. I get rides from other people, and they ask for gas money, and that's hard because they don't want to take you. So, I need a babysitter to get stuff done, and it's a lot...It's frustrating because basically I deal with this all on my own...I don't want to stay at home any more. I don't want to—I mean I'll still be here for my kids but the fact that I'm just sitting around here, and I don't have anything to do. I had stuff that I did want to do, and I'm not doing it. I'm just sitting at home cleaning and doing whatever, and it's just so frustrating. I'm tired of it. That's getting to me—I need to go to school and I need to do this, and I need to finish because this isn't helping me.

Babysitting and transportation were Verna's obstacles to continuing her education.

Verna realized that education was her way out of her life situation. She wanted to move on to a career in the medical field, possibly nursing or as a physician, but without a high school diploma she knew she was going nowhere.

Verna learned of the Graduate New Mexico program through a former high school counselor. She was hesitant about talking to this counselor because when she was originally in high school, he told her to leave high school and enroll in the alternative school. Verna believed he would “put me down again. But I took a chance. I went for it, and he told me about” Graduate New Mexico. She enrolled but did not have access to a computer in her home. The counselor told her she could use one at the high school, but she was not able to get there. She tried using a friend's computer with Internet access but forgot her password.

Verna was enrolled in GNM's English classes. When she sent an email to the instructor to inform her of the computer access situation, Verna did not receive a personal response; instead she began receiving emails from the instructor that stated unless she logged on she would be dropped from the class, which eventually happened.

Tommy: *bullied and teased.* Tommy, 31, dropped out of high school after repeating his sophomore year. He left school with only 1.5 credits on his transcript. His reasons for

dropping out of high school were teasing and bullying. His perception was that the bullying occurred because he was small in stature. He also developed asthma during this time and believes the asthma onset was due to the stress resulting from the bullying he endured. His ill health led to a high absentee rate which affected his grades. Repeating the 10th grade is another reason why Tommy never went back.

Tommy says he reported the bullying, teasing and his feeling of being unsafe to his teachers and principal. The principal told “me that I just had to grow up because that’s how the world was going to be...I had to grow up.” Tommy knew he was not learning as fast as the others in his class, and when he asked for help from the teacher, he found the “teachers that I had didn’t have very much patience and didn’t want to give me that one-on-one. So I fell behind.”

I tried to tell [the principal] how it was hard for me to study and hard for me to work in my classes and how I would ask for help, but the teachers would sometimes brush me off or tell me to read the book. And, I was having a really hard time.

Unsatisfactory interaction with teachers, difficulty with curriculum, and the inability to build peer bonds as well as illness created an intense resistance toward school. Tommy began skipping school, as well as missing for illness, and developed an aversion to school. He quit high school at the age of 16.

Tommy tried a number of programs after dropping out. He went to night school for a while but was so far behind that this solution did not last long, and he left. While in night school Tommy was diagnosed with Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome, a reading disorder. Although he did not stay enrolled in night school, Tommy believed he was achieving at a higher rate than when he was in high school because he was using filters and glasses to read. He tried another work/study program, which helped prepare him for the GED. However,

Tommy was so far behind in his learning and did not possess an adequate body of knowledge that he failed the GED examination “four or five” times. He realized that the GED classroom experience was for test preparation and not to learn subject content.

After these experiences, Tommy went to work in the “industry”, that is, he works as a tattoo artist and body piercer. Tommy married and eventually opened his own tattooing and body piercing business with his wife. However, after several years he closed his business to care for his grandmother stricken with dementia. After she passed away, Tommy enrolled in the Graduate New Mexico program.

Tommy has his entire high school curriculum to recover. But, Tommy was happy in the GNM program because he was able to learn at his own pace, on his time schedule, and receive the one-on-one attention from the teacher he needs. In addition, the GNM online program has afforded him a safe, bully-free environment.

The idea that I was going to have a teacher that would probably be able to give me a little bit more one on one and I was going to be able to do it on my own time and at my own pace...like my experience in school is the teachers go at the teacher’s pace and a lot of the students move forward, but then there are some students that don’t move forward that need that extra help. And, with Graduate New Mexico, I am able to go at my own pace, and I have a little bit more one on one with the teachers who help me if I need it. All I have to do is ask. And, my teachers have been really helpful.

Tommy’s support system was not only the teachers at GNM but his wife. She helped him with his online work and calendared important dates and deadlines. She was a role model for him because she was taking online classes at the local community college.

Tommy completed English, history, and geometry classes through GNM. Tommy and his wife were looking forward to re-opening their business in the near future.

Rosanne: widow. A widow for many years, Rosanne went back to school at the age of 47 to earn her high school diploma through the GNM program. Rosanne, the second oldest sibling, dropped out of high school when she was a sophomore to help her family financially because her father was ill. She was 15 years old at the time she left school. Her father was in need of serious surgery, which forced him to retire. His income ended, but there were five children to support in her family. Rosanne married when she was 18 year old but continued to help financially support her parents and siblings until the last one was out of high school.

Rosanne began her own family of three. While having her children, she planned to go back to high school. However, she did not plan on becoming a widow. Her husband died, and she was left with three small children to support. She realized she needed to work and jumped from job to job. She told her children about the necessity of a high school diploma.

I tell them not finishing really held me down, because you have to have a high school diploma. You have to have it. I think it held me down in the [manner] that I could have done a lot more with my life. I'm not doing that. I'm a baker for APS, but I'd like to be a manager and to be a manager, I have to have a high school diploma. I did climb that ladder; I've got to have that piece of paper in my hand.

Rosanne realized she had to return to school when her children told her, "You need to go back." Her desperation pushed her to make the decision to return to school.

I would go and apply for food stamps, and they would tell me I made 5¢ more, and I couldn't qualify. So, I was right under, and it was like if I would have just gotten that diploma, I wouldn't even be here today.

Rosanne used her deficit to her advantage with her youngest son who was not doing well in high school. She told him, "You know what, buddy, you don't want to be like me. You do not want to live like me." Her son made a deal with her. "You write down that 1-

800 number [for GNM], and I'll graduate on time *and* on the honor roll." He did, and Rosanne enrolled in GNM.

Rosanne's support system was not only through the teachers at GNM but more importantly to her, through her children and her children's friends and teachers. Her high school son sat with her each day after school to help Rosanne with the computer and her homework. If he could not help her, he would ask his teachers at school. The teachers called her at home to offer their tutoring assistance. "It was just a huge family affair...My family helped me a lot."

Rosanne has five and a half courses remaining to complete her requirements for a high school diploma. Her experience with Graduate New Mexico and learning in an online environment was a positive experience for her. She gave credit to the GNM teachers for their help and support. She summed up her experience with these words:

I think it's important to the older people because for one, we have to go to work. Most of us have children they need to raise...I still have my daughter through college, so I still have one at home, and I still pay for college in Arizona. I pay for housing there. So, I think that the opportunity to be able to do it at home, do it at our own paces, to go work and still raise our families, that was huge to give me—to somebody give me an education and to allow me to still live life the way I was doing it. That's all I know how to do. So, it just allowed me to do everything, and then it just worked perfect. It was just a bookmark in life.

In Rosanne's eyes, the GNM program held great importance. With only five and a half credits to obtain her diploma, Rosanne was disappointed and angry when she learned the educational program she saw as a second chance, an opportunity to improve her life, was closed.

I called and I called, and I wrote letters to Susanna (Governor Martinez). I wrote her letters, and I told her I'm—told her who I was, I told her my age, I told her I raised three children, I told her everything, and I told her, 'You took away a program that was so critical to my life.' I mean critical. This could have meant everything to me.

The stories cited above were those of real people describing the extreme life circumstances leading to dropping out of high school. Students leave high school for a variety of reasons—safety, learning difficulties, family needs, and personal circumstances. Their stories told of students-participants’ difficulties and the failure of the educational system, a system that did not “catch” these students with interventions before dropping out. For these student-participants who were falling through the cracks, the high schools were not able to provide for certain individual needs such as support for young parents, mismatched school structure with student lives, bullying and teasing, building student resilience, and a lack of providing outreach and instruction about high school to parents. As the dropouts’ life situations surface, patterns emerged regarding the social and financial impact of dropping out, and the desire to re-capture lost educational ground to better their quality of life. The data from the study’s student- participants illustrated causes for dropping out and ultimately uncovered the success factors of the GNM program in their search to attain a high school diploma. These stories also demonstrated the intense desire the student-participants had to return to school and fulfill their goals and dreams. Their goals and dreams were in stark contrast to the realities of their current lives, illustrating the cost of not finishing high school.

Goals and dreams. Like most people, the participants dreamt about future economic success, career opportunities and being positive role models in their families. Their goals and dreams kept them moving forward and motivated to return to high school and earn their diplomas. The first goal for this group was to obtain a high school diploma. Earning a diploma defined success for them. After that first step, all envisioned themselves attending post-secondary education, helping in family businesses, and entering the military.

With college as a goal, many participants saw a degree as a way to engage in a fulfilling, lucrative, and high status careers. Tommy wanted to re-open his business, begin a family, and travel. Mike wanted a degree in biotechnology and planned to open a business. Christie worked as the bookkeeper for her husband's business. Her goal was to earn a CPA. Brianna's and Susie's ideas of success were to make their daughters proud. Brianna was thinking about potential careers in child services, or as an EMT, or as a parole officer; Susie wanted to work with youth as a counselor or therapist. Kelly planned to enlist in the Army. Patience wanted to open an art gallery because her grandfather had "tons of artwork and jewelry that he's made." She wanted to help him sell his art. Anna's dreams were big. She wanted to move to Tokyo, learn Japanese, and become a video game designer.

Alicia's thoughts turned to her father. She wanted to be "somebody in life" as an insurance adjuster to support her father in his business. John had lofty ideas and a lot of study ahead of him. His dream and goal was to be a PhD physicist with a computer engineering or computer science background. Mary's goal was to be financially self-sufficient by studying nursing. Jim wanted to open a restaurant with a Mid-West barbecue and Mexican influence. He envisioned his restaurant to be a very family friendly place. Juan had a love of computers since his freshman year in high school. He saw himself as a computer engineer or designer/programmer.

Adrian, at 32, was undecided about his career. He either wanted to be a fire fighter or continue as a tattoo artist, which was his current profession. Like Kelly, Antonio wanted to enlist in the Army. He wanted to trade his services to the country for housing, a better income, and continued education. Sandy, too, was interested in the Army like Antonio and Kelly. She had already talked with a recruiter about an ROTC scholarship for college.

Verna was looking into the medical field, either nursing or medical school. Maria would continue her insurance career without a doubt when she received her diploma. Rosanne wanted to pursue the management position she had always wanted and hoped to take a few college classes to continue her education. Lilly was feeling very successful. She graduated with her sister and her brother. All three were drop outs at one time. Lilly was moving on to her local community college to study for a career as a pharmacy technician or in nursing. These were the dreams and goals that motivated this group of participants to earn their high school diplomas through the GNM online program.

The students. The Graduate New Mexico (GNM) program began in August 2010 and was stopped in March 2011 because state funding was pulled from the program. During the short duration of this program, approximately 500 students were admitted to GNM and there were 800 course enrollments through March 2011. At GNM's termination, students who were already enrolled in classes were allowed to complete their coursework through the summer of 2011.

All students who were currently or previously enrolled in GNM were invited to participate in this study. They were solicited by email letters sent out by IDEAL-NM. Over the course of four months three email letters inviting participation were sent out to recruit student participation. Thirty-seven students responded to the invitation to participate. Of those, 24 students returned the consent form. A total of 23 interviews were completed. Of the 23 who returned signed consent forms, fifteen were female and 8 were male. Ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 47 with a mean age of 23. Of the 24 students who returned consent forms, one student did not respond to requests for the actual interview. One student was eliminated from the body of this study because she had never enrolled in or taken a

GNM course; however, she received the invitation email. Five student-participants dropped out in grade 10; seven student-participants dropped out in grade 11; and, 11 student-participants dropped out in grade 12. The student-participants were located throughout New Mexico, from Las Cruces to Farmington to Zuni. Interviews with student-participants were conducted over the telephone, recorded, and transcribed. At the end of the interview, each student-participant could elect to add any comments about their experiences as a GNM student. No participants chose to change their responses. At this writing four student-participants completed classes and earned their diploma and one student-participant earned a GED. Table 5 is a list of all the student-participants and their profile. The profile chart demonstrated the magnitude of the dropout problem in New Mexico and the age range of the student-participants. The reasons for dropping out were many and varied. Most disturbing was the fact that 11 of the 23 student-participants in this study dropped out when they were in their senior year of high school, indicting these student-participants were within reach of completing their course requirements and earning their high school diploma. Whatever the reasons, the longitudinal nature of dropping out was highlighted.

Table 5. Participants' Profile

Name	Sex	Age	Reason Given for Dropping Out	Grade Dropped Out	Diploma/ GED
Lilly	F	29	Drugs; pulled out, influenced by sister's drug use	12	Diploma
John	M	22	Bored in school, failed classes	11	GED
Antonio	M	21	Family financial need	12	
Sally	F	28	Pregnant	12	
Patience	F	31	Pregnant	10	
Mike	M	32	Short credits	12	Diploma
Sahi	M	20	Lost focus; didn't like rules in new school	11	
Jim	M	29	Failed 1 class in Gr.12	12	Diploma
Verna	F	21	Pregnant	12	
Rebecca	F	33	Abusive home; didn't go home; pushed out of school	11	
Kelly	F	18	Illness; told by school to drop out; pushed out	12	
Tommy	M	31	Teased, bullied, health problems, trouble learning	10	
Adrian	M	32	Hated school; special education; wanted to work	11	
Anna	F	18	Illness; mother ill and needed care	12	
Juan	M	19	Anxiety, depression, OCD	12	Diploma
Maria	F	36	Parents needed money	12	
Mary	F	19	Pregnant	11	
Christie	F	44	Stupid kid, head strong	11	
Susie	F	20	Special education, bullied, teased, incompetent teachers, failing grades, pushed out	10	
Brianna	F	20	Special education, bullied, incompetent teachers	10	
Rosanne	F	47	Father ill, needed job to support family and finances	10	

Table 5 Continued

Name	Sex	Age	Reason Given for Dropping Out	Grade Dropped Out	Diploma/ GED
Sandy	F	19	Moved to New Mexico, denied enrollment, credits did not transfer	12	
Alicia	F	21	Pregnant, mental health illness, family problems	11	

The problems the student-participants cited were not new or did not develop overnight but were evolving over time until the student just could not cope with the issue or pressures any more.

Administrators and teachers. In a face-to-face meeting, I personally invited the administrators and the full-time GNM teachers to interview. All of the local administrators and teachers consented to an interview. Consent forms were signed. Interviews with administrators and teachers were conducted face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed. Transcripts were sent for member checks, resulting in no changes.

Background and philosophy of education. The GNM administrators were New Mexico licensed with a variety of teaching experiences including the regular classroom from elementary through high school and some higher education experience. Their backgrounds included teaching Advanced Placement students as well as immigrant and at-risk youth, and two had teaching experience in the online environment. Their philosophies of education were quite different but overlapped in some areas. One was grounded in constructivist learning while the other was based in equity and access focused on 21st Century skills in a learner centered environment.

The teachers were licensed New Mexico teachers. Their backgrounds included teaching middle school through college level classes. They taught in content areas such as political science, mathematics, science, English, and history with accompanying experience in school administration and leadership as well as coaching. Only one instructor did not have experience with at-risk youth. Their philosophies of education ranged from every child can learn in their own way to a view of education based on Freire's work as liberating and freeing. They expressed dismay at the way pre-service teachers were prepared to teach and how teaching and learning was changing.

Perception of the dropout student. I asked a question of each administrator and teacher about their perceptions of a dropout student both before they were employed in the GNM program and after they began working for GNM. How did they describe a dropout student? Did their perception of a dropout change after working for GNM? Is there a profile? The answers ran along a continuum from personal family stories about dropouts to having no experience at all with the dropout population.

The teachers and administrators approached the GNM students with similar yet differing views. One teacher felt very comfortable and knowledgeable about at-risk and dropout students, having worked in several communities with at-risk students and having personal family experience with dropouts. This teacher entered the GNM program with a clear vision of who the students were and saw them as highly motivated—"they really wanted a high school diploma"—but with "huge gaps, not only in education skills, but in technology." The teacher stated the following:

I think my perceptions are the same. I know the plight of dropouts. I have dropouts in my family, so the profile of the student that we work with is closer to me because I grew up around it... My perceptions of 'em really stayed the same...The only thing

that changed for them was having a program that they could access...They really wanted a high school diploma.

Another teacher's experience with at-risk students was gained with numerous years of teaching experience. This teacher's thoughts about the GNM dropout students before starting to teaching at GNM were identical to the students in the GNM program. These students dropped out because the school system did not meet their needs. This teacher's observation of the students was that they had few academic skills, but also low technology skills. They were "poor students" who were not ready for online learning. This teacher shared:

I think my perceptions were pretty much what happened. These were students who dropped out probably for a reason; the reason being that they were poor students. They didn't have skills, so they got frustrated with school, and they just started doing—goofing off or becoming discipline problems and got kicked out.

The third teacher came to the GNM program without experience teaching at-risk or dropout students. The teacher expected the students to be motivated, skilled, and grateful for the opportunity to complete their high school diplomas and believed the students' backgrounds and drop out experiences were now behind them and had no influence on their current or future lives or academic success. This teacher was quickly surprised to discover the students' profiles. The third teacher stated:

My perception was that the students that were entering the program were students who were going to be motivated to get their high school diploma. That they saw this as an opportunity that they...whatever happened to them happened to them in the past, and that they saw this as that opportunity to catch up, basically. But, when I actually got into the program that was not what I found it to be. I found it to be an entitlement that a lot of students saw, that this program's out there, why do I have to work for it kind of attitude; and to a large degree not very successful, because of that.

One of the administrators had definite beliefs that the GNM students were marginalized and their traditional high schools did not meet the students' needs. The

administrator used the term “pushed out” instead of dropout to define the school systems’ failure and described a one-size-fits all approach to education which did not work for these students. The administrator commented:

Definitely had a perception of what dropouts were, and I don’t know that it’s changed from I guess my background, my education. I still see it as they’re not dropouts; they’re push-outs; that the school system has failed them and that if we did things a little differently, that we might not lose so many students. I think we put learners in a box, and they have to fit in the box, and if they don’t, they’re marginalized. They give up.

Another administrator’s view of dropouts differed from one of the teachers. This administrator viewed dropout students as students who were not engaged in school but were capable and just left, while a teacher’s view of dropouts was that these students have “poor skills.” The second administrator said:

I don’t think it would change because I know several students who dropped out of school and were highly intelligent...I didn’t have a perception about dropouts being people who couldn’t acquire more education. They were perfectly capable; they just didn’t...

In this research, the stories, successes and obstacles reported were from the 23 student-participants in the GNM program. It was important to remember the views of the administrators and teachers were reflections of their interaction with many more students than the 23 student-participants. Their compassion and understanding of dropout students in the GNM program and in this research, as well as their teaching and student interaction, influenced the factors of success of the participants.

Research Question 1.0: What Were the Factors that Led Students to Drop Out of High School?

Education was an opportunity for a person to gain skills and prepare for a career and a place in society. The interviews with the student-participants revealed the circumstances in

which the student-participants dropped out as well as the impact of the decision to drop out. There were a number of reasons why the participants dropped out. Some of the causes of students dropping out were in their control while other reasons result from life circumstances. Nevertheless, dropping out was a lost opportunity as evidenced in the student-participants' personal, financial, and social struggles.

Reasons for dropping out

Personal issues. Sickness happens to teens just as it does to any other age group in society. Sickness can also stop high school progress and result in students dropping out.

Juan's story above indicated that mental health issues interrupted his high school education. As his four year cohort continued through school without him, he returned to high school after his initial illness, but it became more difficult for Juan to remain persistent about achieving his high school education. Changing schools seemed to complicate matters. School became an uncomfortable place for him due to fear that others "would look at me and judge me and stuff." His friends were keeping up with their cohort and graduating on time. His perceived gap in his education and his self-consciousness ruled out a five year completion attempt. He escaped to the virtual world of playing on-line games with others to fill his time. "All I wanted to do is play and play all day, and I was addicted to playing life games...online with other people and stuff like that."

Kelly also experienced sickness during her senior year of high school. Her circumstances were different than Juan's. Kelly's illness sent her out of state for hospitalization for four months. The local high school she was attending was not able to provide education for her while she was away from school. As a result, it was the high school who told Kelly to drop out of school.

I had tried to stay in school as long as I could there, but it got to the point where I had to go to the hospital, and they just told me I needed to drop out...they really didn't help me a lot with being able to do my work like sending it in through the mail even, and they just like weren't really compliant. They were just like telling me that there was nothing I could do but drop out, pretty much.

However, not all dropouts left school before their class graduated; they left at graduation.

Leaving at graduation. Some students, classified as dropouts, were on track to graduate but did not have the specific course credits needed to certify graduation. Two student-participants in this study faced this dilemma. Jim and Mike were seniors who lacked credits to graduate.

Jim had one credit in English to complete. When asked about his circumstances around an incomplete high school education he answered: "It wasn't that I dropped out, I just never actually finished. I failed a class in my senior year. I just never went back for that one extra credit." Jim was counted as a dropout.

Mike, like Jim, left school in his senior year. He was classified as a dropout but, "I was in school, and I actually never left; I just didn't graduate with my class." Mike's situation was in his control for the most part. He made some choices during his senior year that cost him graduation.

So I basically kinda went through—my senior year happened, but I just kinda messed around, hung out with the wrong people, ditched class, you know, so I just never graduated. I just kind of went to classes periodically. I didn't go to world history 'cause I didn't like the teacher. I'd go to the classes I liked with the people that I liked. I guess that's about it.

After becoming unhappy with his educational situation, Mike decided to go from one school to the next, like Juan. He found that credits for graduation were categorized for graduation differently from one school to another which became another stumbling block for

Mike. “The outcome that I had to deal with was I had to do more classes than I expected, but I guess there was some classes that I failed, you know, some other classes, too, that I failed and forgot about.”

Mike believed he was an intelligent individual and was fortunate enough to interview well enough to get “good jobs” and the employers “kinda looked past” the fact that he had not graduated. He admits that completing his diploma requirements tugged at him when he was between jobs. Mike was fired from his last position, and the unhealthy economy has made it more difficult for him to find employment. With only five semester credits needed, Mike now has achieved his diploma and is ready to enter a two year college.

Pulled out. Within the group of interview student-participants, there were two student-participants, Lilly and Christie, who were pulled out of school. Being pulled out of school refers to students who are influenced by the bad habits or behaviors of other students outside of school. Behaviors included the use of drugs or alcohol, truancy, or criminal behaviors. In the group of student-participants, Lilly fit that description. Lilly eventually dropped out of school because her sister persuaded her to engage in drug behavior with her.

My sister started doing drugs, and we’re really, really close so she kind of pulled me in that direction, too. That’s what happened. I realized that I wasn’t going to graduate with my class because I wasn’t the best student, but at least I was on track to graduate, and I kind of went the opposite of what I should have thought.

Christie left school in her senior year. She describes herself as a “stupid kid” with an attitude who skipped a lot of school. She was challenged by a teacher to stop talking or leave the classroom—and, that is what Christie did. She felt picked upon, but no one at the school wanted to hear about it because her absentee rate was high. “I was one of their bad kids.” She was influenced by peers to skip, and her mother did not object when Christie wanted to

stay home instead of attending school. Christie's mom did not graduate from high school either.

Pushed out. Five of the participants dropped out of high school as a result of being pushed out of school. A student who was pushed out of school was asked to leave school for a reason or the student perceived an environment that was not conducive to learning and did not feel welcomed by peers, teachers, or administrators. The pushed out student may have experienced an environment of teasing and bullying, a classroom with little attention paid to the student, or failing grades.

Earlier in the chapter, Tommy's story related bullying and teasing as the reason for dropping out of the school environment. Due to his physical stature, high absenteeism due to asthma, and an undiagnosed learning disability, Tommy quit school after sophomore year. His push out the door resulted from failing grades, a lack of attention by teachers to his educational needs, and the principal telling him to "grow up." Tommy's belief was that school was supposed to help, and it did not. "I wasn't receiving help. So, I felt like well, school is not really for me because school is supposed to help, but I wasn't receiving help."

Tommy was a victim of his school's culture. Telling Tommy to "grow up" after experiencing teasing and bullying did not give him the keys to be successful in the school environment. His voice was not heard. He left knowing, in his mind, that high school was an unsafe place to be. Tommy was not a cookie cutter replica of his classmates and could not maneuver the system to meet his needs. Others experienced similar situations.

Enrolled in high school, it was during her sophomore year that Susie needed more help from teachers. She decided to go to an alternative school but discovered that the new environment gave her *less* teacher attention. Susie attempted to re-enroll in her original

school, but one of the principals told her that, “I should just drop out...because I’m just getting too old and I don’t have enough credits, and I’ll be here until I’m about 22. They said ‘Just drop out.’ So, I was so mad, I was so hurt, because they’re supposed to encourage you to finish school.”

Susie was a special education student who, as a junior student, was reclassified as a freshman. By this time, she had completed only eight credits. She found the environment at her original school unfriendly. “And it was already hard enough, and there were people at my school that would bully me and my sister, and nobody would do anything, and they kept doing it and it was just—and then the teachers didn’t know how to teach.”

Susie left high school angry and hurt. She believes teachers did not care about her and did not take the time to understand her learning needs. Susie now has a child to parent, and had difficulty finding child care. Coupled with childcare, transportation was an issue for her to attend an on-campus educational program such as GED preparation. Her lack of education hindered her from finding long-term, stable employment.

Adrian started his educational career in California. When his family moved to New Mexico, Adrian was placed in special education classes. He was told that he was placed in special education because of his behavior; there was no other diagnosis. His parents accepted whatever the school recommended. Adrian believed the education in California was more advanced. He grew to hate school in New Mexico and left to go to work. “I just hated school, and I wanted to go work.” Adrian dropped out in grade 11.

Adrian may have been a rebellious young man as a teen and had little patience for his online program. He became impatient when there was a slight bump in the road in his educational pursuits—the computer would not open, the link did not work, and his daughter

needed his attention—and did not seem to be able to organize his life around these. His lack of education won him only hard labor jobs.

John left high school in his sophomore year. He failed all his classes. John was caught up in the social milieu of school, groups and cliques. He did other things in class. His thoughts wandered while in class, “because I thought it was just boring.” He moved to an alternative school, which operated on a self-paced model. John liked this because his interest in classes could be piqued. However, new curriculum sequencing was put into place, and that reminded John of his previous school. “This feels too much like regular high school.” He and his parents signed the papers releasing John from high school when he was 17 years old.

John was the creative student who did not fit into the traditional school—the round peg in a square hole. He liked the arts and talking with people. John wanted to work in a call center, but without his diploma or a GED, he could not be hired. John passed his GED and was working in a call center at the time of his interview. He used his creativity to help clients solve problems.

Family issues. For some dropouts, life just got in the way. They were caught in circumstances beyond their control. The context in which these student-participants dropped out was related to their families and the need their families had for them to help out financially and with family care.

Anna left high school in the second quarter of her senior year. There were two reasons for her leaving high school early. The primary reason was to care for her mother who had become disabled. Her disability required more and more of Anna’s time; eventually, Anna could not leave her alone. When I asked if she would have stayed in school

if her mother's disability would not have been so severe, she answered that she would not. Probing further, the second reason Anna dropped out of school surfaced. Similar to Kelly, Anna had an undiagnosed illness at the time which resulted in a high absentee rate. The illness made it difficult for Anna to sit in a desk for a long period of time. "They knew that I was always sick and going home a lot of the time, but I think that they thought I was faking it a lot of the time."

Anna left school to care for her mom, while she herself was sick and had a record of high absenteeism. Who advocated for Anna? When Anna was finally diagnosed she went back to the high school to inform them so that no other student would be put in her situation. Anna did not have the capacity or will to work and fit in online education simultaneously.

Rebecca moved to Boise, Idaho when she was in the sixth grade. She had to adjust to being one of just a couple of minority students in the class. "My sixth grade year, there was one Mexican girl and only one black girl, and that was the minority right there." When she moved to another school, "there were two other kids plus me." The remainder of the school population was "blond and blue eyes." She experienced students and teachers asking her questions about cowboys and Indians, and if she "still lived in teepees and just the stupid questions like did you ever ride in a car before you moved here." Rebecca became tired of the prejudicial questions and began to act out.

And by the time I got done with middle school, I was sick of the people asking me questions and I kind of backlash at school, talking back. I was in detention quite a bit. Because I was just tired of the questions and I just didn't want to answer them. And not answering them seemed to get me in more trouble than answering them. So, they sent me to an alternative high school...It was called the Last Chance.

Then home life began to interrupt school and became worse from middle school to high school. Rebecca's physically abusive father left one day when she was 15 and took

everything they owned, furniture and all. Her mother was not around much for support or guidance. Rebecca was left on her own. In addition, her aunt and three month old baby cousin lived in the house with her. “My aunt just one day, she decided she was going to a store and just never returned.” By the time Rebecca was 16, she was caring for herself, her nine year old brother and a three month old cousin. She went to work while in school to help pay bills. Rebecca tried to spend time with her friends, but her responsibilities at home became too much. She began to miss school. Rebecca’s absenteeism resulted in academic probation with the warning that if she missed another day, she “would be kicked out” of school.

So I went to school one day, and I got the big old lecture about being responsible and being a responsible teenager, and I felt like just screaming and telling them I am responsible. I have to feed two kids at home. I’ve got utilities to pay. And they are telling me about being responsible. They are asking where my mind was and how I’m going to get an A in math today or not...they just expect them to forget the whole world once we get to school. But, it just doesn’t work that way.

In her mind, Rebecca was acting as an adult at a very young age, providing food and a home for two younger relatives. Being lectured about her attendance at school and dealing with prejudicial comments at school were factors that Rebecca felt she could not negotiate. Her scenario begs the question: Who at school noticed an obviously impossible living situation for this student-participant and her sibling and cousin? What interventions did the school provide? Is this another case of a student who not only dropped out because of severe family crisis but also because the school pushed the student out? Was Rebecca seen as a trouble maker rather than a 16 year old girl managing adult responsibilities? Students sent to a school named Last Chance were sent the message that there was little hope left in their lives through education. Rebecca was a casualty of family crisis and racial prejudice by her

school system, which was tasked with assisting at-risk students and acting as their first line of defense. According to Rebecca, the school system did little to help her. By the time Rebecca moved back to New Mexico she was 18. A year later, Rebecca's cousin was old enough to attend school, but Rebecca found she was too old to return to high school.

At 19 years of age, Rebecca inherited enormous adult responsibilities and the feeling that she was not welcome back to school. Rebecca made decisions and choices that affected her life and the lives of her sibling and young cousin. Holding a job, providing food, and paying the bills were survival techniques Rebecca used just to get through the day. She believed providing a home with utilities and food was more important for the three of them and school had to play second fiddle. Rebecca was determined to be a responsible caregiver at her own future expense. However, without a diploma, Rebecca could not move forward educationally or financially.

Antonio moved from school to school when he was growing up in Michigan. He eventually went to seven high schools. He dropped out of school during his senior year because his mom was in dire financial conditions. He decided to leave school to work when he had only three credits left. "We were in a tough situation. My mom had nobody else, and I was the oldest. I'm the oldest, and I had to help her out, and I decided to get out of school when I had three credits left... Yeah, I'm a senior, so I wasn't thinking of the consequences. I was just thinking I need to help my mom."

For Antonio, the immediacy of the situation was all he could see. There was little thought of his future and the impact of dropping out. His younger siblings have graduated, and he feels like he lost out. Because Antonio was the oldest, he tried to be the adult but jeopardized his own education and future.

Examining the life circumstances of Anna, Rebecca, and Antonio demonstrated that there was no one in their lives to support them or intervene for them. They took on adult responsibilities at very young ages due to parent absences, needs or indifference. There was no one in their lives to encourage them to continue their education at the developmentally appropriate time and complete high school. Some dropouts are compelled to support family without thought of how dropping out of high school would affect the remainder of their lives. Maria continues to look upon her drop out experience as a serious blunder. “It was a bad mistake, believe me. I’ve been paying for it ever since.”

Pregnancy. Pregnancy and the subsequent care for the baby were the reasons for dropping out of school for four female participants. Most of the women were without the financial, physical or emotional support from the father of the child, which made it difficult to continue going to school. Patience was in the ninth grade and 17 years old when her child arrived. She was able to complete the year but was unable to return the next school year because a teen parent program was not available to her due to lack of transportation.

Sally was due with her child in April of her senior year. She was told that if she did not physically take finals and walk graduation to get her diploma, she would not graduate. Sally dropped out of school and learned that her baby had died in utero about a month later. She needed surgery. Sally went back to school to see if she could make up any lost school work. “I was told no, that if I was out of school for four or five weeks, that I had to finish that year and go a whole other year. They wouldn’t let me graduate. “It’s just because I got pregnant...They really didn’t want me there because...I guess maybe they thought I was a bad influence.” Sally fit the category of being pushed out of school.

Alicia became pregnant at 14 years old and enrolled at a local teen parent program. She dropped out in the eleventh grade due to family problems and a diagnosis at the time of mental health problems. Alicia found employment for a while at a large local retail store but transportation was an issue. At this time, Alicia found transportation and was able to access the Internet at the local library enabling her to complete the high school work she has been assigned so far. Without the diploma, she cannot move to a career that would financially support herself and her child.

Verna was pregnant with her second child and dropped out of high school at the beginning of her senior year. The father of her first child left after the baby was eight months old. Verna returned to school and cared for the first child when she became pregnant with her second child. She was exhausted trying to keep up with school and taking care of her first baby. While her parents helped with some child care, and daycare was available at her school, she explained why she did not use this resource.

I didn't have anybody to take me around to apply for the daycare. Where I went to school they had daycare. It was just a matter of somebody telling me if I needed help they would help me and when it came around to it, it never came down to it.

At the time of this interview, Verna had four children and lived with her fiancé. She was unemployed, but had held menial jobs in “fast-food places and restaurants.” In her words, “gas money and finding someone to take me places” was an obstacle for Verna to accomplish anything. Verna's life was to stay at home. With four children and little money, finding a babysitter was a struggle.

Administrators' and teachers' perspectives on factors that led to dropping out.

The GNM administrators and teachers heard many reasons why students dropped out of school and corroborated the information I heard in participant interviews. One teacher

related stories about many single mothers who became pregnant in high school and became upset at hearing these stories.

What upset me was that a lot of the stories I got from the single mothers [was] how the school pretty much just forced them out just because they were pregnant; they didn't do anything to help 'em. So, these young ladies just gave up and started trying to be the family person. Of course, then they wind up single, then they can't get a job..."

The teacher continued to talk about those students who had discipline issues and school support.

Those students had some kind of problems in schools, and the schools didn't support 'em and tried to get rid of 'em because schools don't want discipline problems, and they don't want distractions. So, it was a support issue for those students; that's why they dropped out. The they dropped out and realized that they can't get ahead without a high school diploma..."

Another teacher heard a plethora of stories from the students. This teacher heard stories about students who were not interested in school. Others were bullied, and nobody was doing anything about it, so the students stopped attending. Some of the females were pregnant and "were embarrassed 'cause the teachers and principals didn't want 'em there." Many of this teacher's students were in poverty situations at home and left school early because "I had to work and help my family."

This teacher related the "bad" stories of the "students who the teachers told them they would amount to nothing, and they needed to leave school." On the other hand, some were living in the dropout moment only and not thinking of the future. "I was stupid. I got married and thought I would not need an education." The teacher attributed this attitude to lack of school and family support. "If the family lets them stay home, hey, I'm going to stay home."

The teacher related many more examples of dropping out:

- ✓ Parents on welfare who could not make ends meet; student drops out to help family financially; poverty issues in families
- ✓ Criminal activity in schools; one girl raped
- ✓ Lack of transportation leading to lack of access to education
- ✓ Students moving from one school to another; credits “getting messed up”
- ✓ Teachers telling students they would amount to nothing
- ✓ “The counselors screwed me over.”

This teacher viewed online education as a solution to help students overcome their reasons for leaving school. Online education can provide the access students did not have in New Mexico, especially for those who were living in rural, outlying areas, in which the school may be one to two hours away. “Kids are dropping out because they don’t even have access to an education...enter online learning to help these students out.”

Another teacher heard many reasons for dropping out of school when trying to get her students to complete their work. The teacher found that their reasons for dropping out became their excuses for not doing their work; the teacher had little patience for their excuses. “You know, this happened to me, and I got pregnant at 15, or I got kicked out of the house or whatever else. It just kept going, and they kept using those excuses over and over and over again.”

One administrator had a very definite picture of the student-participants in this study and the students in the GNM program as a whole. Agreeing with one of the teacher, this administrator believed strongly that “they’re not dropouts; their push-outs; that the school system has failed them and that if we did things a little differently, that we might not lose so

many students.” The students the administrator spoke with tell her they “want a better life. They realized that without a high school diploma they can’t get a good job. They can’t advance.” Student-participants Tommy, Brianna, Susie, and Verna left high school discouraged, angry, hurt, and pushed out as did many of the other female student-participants who left high school due to pregnancy and child care issues. In their cases, it was the teachers and the administrators who left them with a feeling that they were unwelcome in their schools. As one administrator stated, “It not really *how* the principal felt; it’s how the *student* felt the principal felt.”

Table 6 lists the reasons the student-participants dropped out of school with their supporting comments.

Table 6. Summary: Factors the led to dropping out of high school

Illness: A few students dropped out of school due to illness identified as personal mental health issues, physical illness, or parent illness. In these cases the schools did not offer an intervention for the student-participants to continue their schooling or their illness was not identified but coupled with high absentee rates.

Mental health illness:
 “I usually didn’t want to go most of the time because of the people...I was missing so much school...I was going through a depression. I had anxiety. I went to another school...cause all my friends were there...but it ended up being different...I stopped going after like a month around there.” Juan

Physical illness:
 I had tried to stay in school as long as I could there, but it got to the point where I had to go to the hospital, and they just told me I needed to drop out...they really didn’t help me a lot with being able to do my work.” Kelly

Table 6 Continued

<p>Leaving at graduation: Some students remained in school until graduation but did not take senior year seriously or failed a class the last semester and did not make up the credit. For other students moving from one school to another proved a credit deficit in the end because credits were applied to graduation differently from one school to the next.</p>	<p>“It wasn’t that I dropped out, I just never actually finished. I failed a class in my senior year. I just never went back for that one extra credit.” Jim</p> <p>“My senior year happened. I just kinda messed around, hung out with the wrong people, ditched class, I just never graduated...I went from one school to the next...The credit they had were set up differently...the outcome that I had to deal with was I had to do more classes than I expected, but I guess there were some classes I failed...and forgot about.” Mike</p>
<p>Pulled out of school: Students who are influenced by the bad behaviors or bad habits of others such as drug/alcohol use, criminal behavior or truancy may follow the behaviors of these peers and drop out of school.</p>	<p>“My sister started doing drugs, and we’re really, really close so she kind of pulled me in that directions, too...I was on track to graduate, and I kind of went the opposite of what I should have though.” Christie</p>
<p>Pushed out of school: Student-participants who were pushed out of school felt unwelcome in the school due to poor rapport with teachers and administrators. Peers bullied and teased them, creating in them the feeling of an unsafe environment. Some students do not receive the academic help they need due to learning differences which may have been diagnosed or missed and not diagnosed.</p>	<p>In freshman [year] I got all F’s...When I was a junior I was a third freshmen...They said if I failed again I was gonna get kicked out.” Brianna</p> <p>“I went to school and got about ...eight or nine credits...I wanted to go to a different school...I didn’t make no credits...I was trying to re-enlist at Del Norte with one of the principals...they told me that I should just drop out...I’m just getting too old and I don’t have enough credits and I’ll be there until I’m about 22.. They said, ‘Just drop out.’ I was so mad and so hurt because they’re supposed to encourage you to finish school.” Susie</p> <p>“And it was already hard enough, and there were people at my school that would bully me and my sister, and nobody would do anything, and they kept doing it.” Brianna</p>

Table 6 Continued

	<p>“I am very short and small and I was teased and bullied a lot. School really wasn’t a comfortable and safe environment for me. I wasn’t learning as fast as the other kids and sometimes the teachers that I had didn’t have very much patience and didn’t want to give me that one-on-one. So I fell behind.” Tommy</p>
	<p>“They’re not dropouts; their push-outs; that the school system has failed them and that if we did things a little differently, that we might not lose so many students.” Administrator</p>
<p>Family issues Care of a sick parent: On student-participant left school to care for an ill parent. In addition, the student-participant had a high absentee rate due to taking care of her parent but also because she had an undiagnosed illness.</p>	<p>“My mother became disabled at the time, and she just kept needing me more and more, and I just eventually couldn’t even get to school long enough to leave—couldn’t leave her long enough to do that.” Anna</p>
<p>Financial support: A few of the student-participants dropped out of high school close to graduation because a need arose to help support the family financially.</p>	<p>“I decided to work. We were in a tough situation. My mom had nobody else and I was the oldest...I decided to help her out.” Antonio</p>
	<p>“I left school because my father got very ill...that was the end of his income...I left school to help around the house and take care of things that needed to be taken care of...There wasn’t enough money to raise five children...So I had to go to work.” Rosanne</p>
<p>Lack of family support for education: The parents of some student-participants did not appear to value education. If they did not finish high school, it appeared not important for their children to complete high school.</p>	<p>“If the family let’s them stay home, hey, I’m going to stay home.” Teacher</p>

Table 6 Continued

<p>Pregnancy: Several student-participants became pregnant during high school. Complications with the pregnancy, the amount of time and energy to care for a child, and the lack of an early parent plan by the school ultimately led these student-participants to drop out of high school.</p>	<p>“I got pregnant and I was due around the time of graduation and I was told that if I was not physically in school to take finals and to walk and take my diploma, then they would not let me graduate...I dropped out of school about a month after I dropped out of school, I find out that I lost the baby...I asked if I could go back...they wouldn’t let me graduate.” Sally</p>
<p>Not engaged in school: School was boring for some student-participants. The curriculum was not meaningful or creative enough for them. Finding work was more meaningful for some.</p>	<p>“I was pregnant with my second child and just going through it was really tough. I was just so tired all the time. I felt like I couldn’t really do it. I couldn’t concentrate.” Verna</p> <p>“I wasn’t completely challenged in high school. I always thought things were kind of mundane...I started just not wanting to do my work because it wasn’t interesting to me, so I actually ended up bailing I believe toward the end of my freshman year...I wasn’t like I couldn’t do it.” John</p>
	<p>“I just hated school, and I wanted to go work.” Adrian</p>

Table 6 Continued

<p>Moved to another school: Some student-participants moved from one school to another either by choice or family move. In the process, they lost credits or had to take course to satisfy graduation requirements that they had satisfied in their previous school.</p>	<p>“I just wasn’t completely challenged in high school. I always thought things were kind of mundane...I started just not wanting to do my work because it wasn’t interesting to me, so I actually ended up bailing toward the end of my freshmen year...So I switched to...an alternative high school, which was cool. I could work at my own pace. But after a while, I just—they started changing the curriculum and they wanted certain classes to follow a certain way about things, and I just said, ‘This feels too much like regular high school,’ and I signed the papers to be released when I was 17.” John</p> <p>“People moving again and credits getting messed up.” Teacher</p> <p>“I never actually tried to go back to school. The reason why is California and New Mexico have different graduation standards, and I would have had to take all my math again and math is my worst subject...” Lilly</p>
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Summary. The student-participants expressed a number of reasons for dropping out of high school. Personal health issues caused students to fall behind and drop out. Some student-participants did not leave school early but did not complete course requirements for graduation. These student-participants were labeled dropouts because they did not return to complete the credits for graduation. Other student-participants were either pulled out of school by the influence of other peers or pushed out due to unmet learning needs, bullying and teasing, or pregnancy. They left school with a feeling that they were unwanted. Financial and family support drew student-participants out of school without a thought to their future.

Administrators and teachers heard many of the same stories and the same reasons from the students they worked with in GNM. They related additional reasons heard from students not in this study such as criminal activity in the schools, lack of transportation, teachers and counselors not holding the students best interest at heart. Sometimes the reasons for dropping out became the excuse for not completing course work but thought online education was a good option for these students.

Research Question 2.0: What Factors Led Students to Return to High School?

Finding an answer to this research question meant finding the reasons the student-participants were seeking re-admission to traditional high school. The answer to this question was surprising, unexpected, and out of the control of the student-participants.

The student-participants were actively seeking a means to achieve a high school diploma. Their desperation for a high school diploma led many to investigate returning to traditional high school but upon inquiring found the doors to traditional high school closed to them. New Mexico school law prohibits a student over the age of 19 to be enrolled in a public high school. Special education students may be enrolled until they reach the age of 23. All of the participants interviewed, except Kelly, were locked out of the traditional high school classroom because they exceeded the legal age to be enrolled in traditional high school.

Kelly, the youngest student-participant, missed four months of her senior year due to illness and hospitalization out of state. When she returned, she needed several months of recuperative time and treatment locally. Her school cohort graduated in May 2011. When she felt she needed to be productive about finishing high school, she enrolled in the GNM program to complete graduation requirements until she heard to program was closing.

Because of her young age, Kelly was allowed to enroll in another online program through her school district. At the time of this interview Kelly had completed all the online courses she could complete except for one to fulfill her graduation requirements. Because she was still in the age range for enrollment in the public schools, she planned to complete her diploma requirements during the Fall 2011 semester and graduate.

Administrators' and teachers' perspectives on students returning to high school.

Administrators and teachers did not comment on students returning to a traditional high school.

Summary. New Mexico has an age limit that restricts students from returning to high school after 19 years of age. Although the student-participants were seeking a high school diploma, the traditional high school track was blocked and out of their reach. Only one student-participant, Kelly, in this study was age eligible to return to the traditional high school. She needed only one more course to complete requirements for a diploma. She planned to do so in the fall semester of 2011 and graduate at that time.

Research Question 2.1: What Factors Prompted Dropout Students to Return to a High School Diploma Program Online Instead of Returning to a Face-To-Face High School Class?

The “AHA” moment. At various times in their lives, every participant experienced a moment when they knew they had to return to school if their lives were going to change for the better. This was their “aha” moment. A few participants expressed the fact that the “aha” moment came to them several times. It was the experience of these moments that spurred them on to seek a solution to completing high school.

Job improvement. Many of the student-participants expressed the desire to go back to high school because they realized what they had missed out on when they dropped out of school. They were tired of their daily struggles which pushed them back to high school. The negative impact of not having a high school diploma was a driving factor that led them back to high school.

The time gap between leaving high school and returning to the high school through the GNM program varied for these participants. For most, it was a matter of years. For many, life has been a struggle because they lived in a society that has minimal educational expectations of a high school education and diploma, and they have not achieved these expectations. They faced difficulty getting jobs, part-time or full-time, that offer salaries that would sustain them and their families. Without a diploma, they realized their earning power would not rise much beyond minimum wage, and they may not acquire the necessities of life much less some of the luxuries life has to offer. Life without a diploma not only impacted the participants' ability to get a job, it also limited their job promotions and negatively influenced self-esteem.

Antonio's "aha" moment came while he was working at the car wash. Even though he was placed in a management position, he knew he had to find something better.

Because I was working, because I was busting my ass and I was like, can't do this anymore, got to get my diploma, I have to move on. I can't be busting my ass for this amount of money and I can get my diploma and you know, I was working and it was hot, I was sweating. I was all dirty. Then, I would get tired. You know, worked almost what? Twelve hour shift and go back and do it again, and I only got Sunday's off and I didn't get rest enough and then I had to go back and do it on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday and then go back.

Antonio described his existence as a weekend job “and that’s it, that’s my life.” He perceives this as his punishment because he has not finished high school. “I haven’t finished school, and I have to suffer the consequences.”

Sahi enrolled in the online program to earn his diploma so that he can not only get a job but live independently from his parents. He described the desperation of life without a diploma as intolerable. His desire was “not living like this anymore. Not having a job and not making any money for myself to move out and things.” Sahi had applied to many local businesses but had not found employment. “I have not really been able to get a job here, or anywhere, really. No one will hire me.” He had not even received call backs for interviews. When he followed up, employers did not offer jobs, “they’ll call me back, but then nothing ever happens, and then I have to just move on.”

Sense of urgency. When Maria realized she had only two credits needed to complete her diploma, she was motivated to return to school.

When I found out I was just like two credits away from making it, from getting my high school diploma, I figured, you know, I have to hurry up and finish this, try and do this. Get this obstacle out of the way. And, I think that’s what helped me motivate myself to do it.

Lilly had a sense of urgency and desperation about going back to school to the point that “I was even thinking of going back to high school at the actual high school...just go like every other kid.” Mary’s age prohibited her from returning to a traditional school, but the thought of earning her diploma weighed on her mind. “I’ve gone through a lot of points that I have to go back and I have to and I’m just trying to get there.” She needed 17 credits to finish her diploma.

For self and others. Some interviewees wanted to complete their diploma requirements not only for themselves, but for others in their lives. Rosanne had her “aha” moments when she was denied food stamps for her family because she earned a nickel more than was allowed. “Every time I ‘aha’d’, my children ‘aha’d’ with me and told me, you need to go back.” Alicia, Christie, Susie, and Brianna had young children in their lives, and they wanted to be good role models for them. Alicia wanted her child to recognize good financial support was based in education. These mom-participants did not want to try to rationalize to their children why they should finish high school when they did not. Brianna’s sense of being a good role model was reflected in her comments. “And when I had my daughter, I wanted her to see that I went back to school and then she has no saying that I didn’t go to school, so why does she have to go to school?” Susie shared Brianna’s thoughts. “Yeah, I don’t want her to be like, ‘Well, you never finished school, there’s no point for me. I wanna be like you,’ and stuff like that.”

Christie faced her “aha” moment at her daughter’s graduation.

Because I didn’t want my kids to tell me, “Mom, you never stayed in school, why should we?” And they were getting to be that age. Getting to see my middle one graduate, that was, I guess, what really did it. I was like, “Gosh, she’s graduated, and I haven’t graduated. That’s pretty sad.”

Patience only earned four and half credits when she left high school. She knew it would take her a long time to make up her high school credits for a diploma, and money was a concern after she left school. Patience had her ‘aha’ moment when she saw the GNM advertisement in the paper.

Just when I saw the ad in the paper. I was like, ‘Whoa.’ I said—you know—I had been talking to my sister about it, and I just told her like I can’t afford the online classes that they offer at some of the colleges, you know. They’re thousands of dollars, and I was like, ‘I cannot afford it.’ And, when I saw that ad in the paper and

they said it was free and everything like that, I was like, ‘that’s it—that’s what I’m gonna do.’

Sally was married to a man who had a degree and was the step-father to her children. She encouraged her children to attend school and finish college because “I’m tired of working evening shifts where I’m not seeing my kids because they’re at school all day, and I’m at work all night making minimum wage breaking my back to earn hardly anything.” She believed her husband was a good role model for her children educationally, and she wanted to elevate herself to be the same role model for her children.

I don’t want kids to wind up like I have, you know? I don’t want them not going to college, not finishing school. I like the fact that my kids can see right now—my older ones, they see that their step-dad doesn’t have to work quite as hard, and he makes really good money, versus mom who’s not home that much and she doesn’t get paid very much and she’s always tired because she has to work so hard.

Limiting factors. As mentioned in the previous section (RQ 2.0) New Mexico school law prohibits a student over the age of 19 to be enrolled in a public high school. Special education students may be enrolled until they reach the age of 23. The age limit was a factor for the participants in this research. All of the participants interviewed, except Kelly, were locked out of the traditional high school classroom because they exceeded the legal age to be enrolled in traditional high school.

Kelly missed four months of her senior year due to illness and hospitalization out of state. When she returned, she needed several months of recuperative time and treatment locally. Her school cohort graduated. She enrolled in the GNM program and another online program through her school district because she was in the appropriate age range to complete her graduation requirements except for one class. Because she was still in the age range for

enrollment in the public schools, she completed her diploma requirements during the Fall 2011 semester and graduated with a diploma.

Since the majority of participants were beyond the age of 19, age became a socialization and self-esteem issue. They saw themselves past the teen years and believed they would not fit in a traditional high school setting anymore. Some of the participants expressed the fact that they would “feel embarrassed” sitting in a class with teenagers. Adrian did not want to have to deal with teenagers, their teen life style, and immaturity. “I’ll be the older one, but there’s gonna be a lot of immature kids there. I can’t deal with that.”

The participants in this research study are motivated to obtain their high school diploma. In the state of New Mexico, the student-participants found only one option to obtain a high school credential before GNM opened, that was, a GED. Brianna, Susie, and Patience found programs at their local community colleges, but transportation and the time of day presented issues for them. This may be reflective of their lack of time management skills as well as their family obligations and work. Patience lasted only three weeks in the GED program.

And, it was too hard, because I was also working at the time, ‘cause like I said, I was a single—well, I was a single mom. So, I went and I got a job right away so I could support my son, and so it was just me, and it was just too hard because I was spending too much time away from my son. So, I ended up having to drop out of that class...I just couldn’t spare the extra time at all.

Additionally, their inability to be financially successful influenced their ability to pay for diploma and GED programs. Besides getting to the GED site for classes, Patience was not able to pay for the GED tests, five tests at \$20.00 each. One hundred dollars was more than she could afford.

It's just you can't afford it. I mean when you're not working, it's hard, because it's \$20.00 per test, and there's what, five tests to take. It's \$100.00, like you know what I mean? And, so it's like I don't have \$100.00 to spare, and there's nothing that—there's not funding for it or anything like that, and all the classes, like I said, are over at the community college, and where I live, it's like too hard to commute. Even if it's like, you know, a few nights a week or whatever, it's still hard for me to go out that way because I have a lot of things that I have to do with my oldest son, also.

Others, like Tommy, found two programs that were test preparation courses for the GED test. Tommy tried the GED program but failed “four or five times.” “I could never pass because I didn't learn enough in school for me to be able to pass my GED.” As mentioned previously, Tommy left high school with only 1.5 credits and did not have the necessary academic fund of knowledge to complete either of these programs. He needed more than basic test taking strategies; he required actual academic information. Tommy, 31, did not fit in at a traditional school with teenagers. Susie, a special education student, learned she could have stayed in school until the age of 23. Even though she found a charter school that she could enroll in before her 21st birthday, she believes online education was just easier and faster and “for my age I won't be sitting there being like the oldest person in the class.” She was 20 years old at the time of the interview.

Sahi wanted to “pass high school just like everyone else, and get my high school diploma, and move on.” His search to find a diploma program has frustrated him.

And unfortunately, I haven't been able to do that, and it really sucks, 'cause here I am at 20 years old, with no high school diploma yet, and I'm still not doing anything to get it, 'cause there is just nothing here for me to do that.

The importance of a diploma versus a GED. The fact that the State of New Mexico offered an additional program at no cost to obtain a high school diploma was an opportunity these participants thought they would never have. It was an opportunity to demonstrate who they were and to build on the high school work many had already

accomplished. Like employers and the United States military, they saw value in the diploma that could not compare with the GED.

After Tommy enrolled in two GED courses to prepare for the GED test, he was the most vocal about his preference for a high school diploma.

Graduate New Mexico's standards and classes were a lot harder than GED classes...Like they say the GED is the equivalent to a diploma but I think that if you have an opportunity to get your GED or get your diploma, I would rather go for my diploma. And to tell you the truth, the classes (GED) weren't as hard—I didn't retain that much information. Like my history class, I was like wow; I learned so much more than like okay, just prepare for the tests. Here are the kinds of questions that you have to look for on the tests. And, I was actually learning stuff about our history. I don't think it can compare.

For some participants obtaining their diploma instilled a sense of pride and high self-esteem. This perception was particularly evident in their comments that getting a diploma was an accomplishment and not just taking the lazy or easy way out. Jim needed only one credit to complete his diploma requirements but, "I just didn't know the avenue of where to start to do that...Just the fact that I could actually get my high school diploma, and I didn't have to settle for a GED. That was the thing that I really liked about it."

For Christie, the sense of accomplishment and providing a good role model for her children was apparent.

It's just so that I can say I did it. And, I didn't take the easy way out, even though I think it's harder. I don't have to tell my kids, 'Well, I dropped out and got my GED' when I encourage them every day to go to school.

Rebecca saw earning her diploma in the same light as Christie. Rebecca, as a good role model for her children, taught them a life lesson about hard work.

For me, a GED is like a shortcut. It's just like okay; I just wanted to get it done with. And for me getting the high school diploma was actually doing the work to get it. I don't look badly on anybody who gets GED's but the way I tell my kids, you've got

to work hard for what you want and there are no shortcuts in life. And, I'm proving to them that I could get my high school diploma, and I didn't take the shortcut.

For Lilly to move her college career forward in the medical sciences, her research at both the 2-year and 4-year colleges required a high school diploma. A GED would not substitute. Sandy found a similar situation when she was researching careers in the Criminal Justice field. "Because most of the jobs that I tried to apply for, like in the Criminal Justice field, they always said to have a high school diploma."

Juan was looking for the edge over someone who held a GED. When "jobs ask you if you have a diploma they are more surprised if you tell them you're in a diploma [program] rather than GED, so I think it is way better." Sally was thinking psychologically, making the same point with her comments, looking at the reputation of the employee through the employer's eyes.

If I was an employer and somebody came in and showed me a GED, then I would wonder more of, 'Why didn't they finish school? Are they a quitter? What were the circumstances? Have they changed?' Rather than if I see a diploma, I say, 'At least they took the time to finish school.'"

Mary knows she will feel better about herself "and not only that, you'll get more opportunities out there... that's why it made it better than a GED."

Sahi believes the GED was a second option for people who have dropped out of high school. He wanted to earn the diploma because he had almost all the credits he needed to graduate and has worked for them. "Because I mean, I've gotten so many credits that I'm like really close to graduating, and it would suck to throw all that away just to take a test and pass and get my GED."

When I asked Mike about pursuing alternative programs to obtain a high school credential, he reflected on his experiences in a GED test preparation course. When he heard

about the GNM program he thought “that sounds a lot better than doing this.” Although Mike did not consider the amount of work or rigor of the GNM program, he perceived earning a high school diploma was the best course of action for him. Initially, during the interview, Mike stated, “the GED is not difficult.” However, as the discussion continued he reconsidered admitting, “A diploma definitely does have a little bit more rank or pull over a GED.”

Alicia believed the GED and high school diploma were equivalent and either credential would move a person forward. This was contradictory to comments by other participants. It was interesting that Alicia chose the more lengthy pursuit of her diploma rather than completing the GED within a few months.

But, it (diploma) means more to me because I worked hard for all those credits, and I really cherish all those memories from when I went to high school and it just means a lot to me, especially because I went through a lot as a teen mother.

Administrators’ and teachers’ perspectives of returning to high school in an online program.

Sense of urgency, resiliency, and persistence. The administrators and teachers interacted with hundreds of students, many of whom did not succeed in the GNM program and struggled to complete classes. They were all vocal about the quality of the students, that was, the lack of readiness for online education, and very little if any formal high school education for that matter, in the areas of cognitive, social, and technology development. However, for all the students that had troubles, there was a group of students who were intent on completing classes and earning their diplomas. One teacher attributed success to those students with “intrinsic resiliency that some of them have.” Another teacher explained student success factors as “support from home and family” as well as program support. The

teacher described the successful students as “persistent.” Some of the students were described as “very poor students” but “they were persistent enough to complete everything and get a passing grade.” Another teacher agreed with this teacher. “I think it was coming from persistence. I also feel as if they had another support system, whether it was a spouse or family member, and/or...site coordinators.”

Job improvement and goals and dreams. At the time students dropped out of school there appeared to be little thought or discussion about the ramifications of this decision. None of the participants, except Rosanne and Kelly, talked of future plans to continue their education with the goal of a high school diploma at the time they dropped out of school. Life experiences brought them to the realization that their earlier decision to drop out of high school was impacting them in a negative way. They were now older without options to improve jobs or pursue goals and dreams.

An administrator talked with many students who called to express interest in the GNM program to move forward in their lives.

I got a lot of calls when they were calling about being interested in the program and study. They want a better life. They realize that without a high school diploma they can't get a good job. They can't advance. Some were interested in going to college, just basic, I guess, livelihood, improving their quality life is what was at the center of the interest.

One teacher's experience was the same. For most of his students they just wanted a better job. “They've been working in minimum wage, dead end jobs, so they thought this was the way to move ahead. A lot of 'em were to provide better support for their family...Some of 'em said they wanted to go to college.” One of the teachers counseled students with the thoughts of best options for the students, including the GED and community college. The teacher believed some had lofty ideas about attending college even

though they were struggling. But, the teacher realized “some of ‘em they wanna go to college. It’s not just high school.”

I asked an administrator about other high school completion program in Albuquerque. The administrator thought for a moment and believed there might be one program that was at night, face-to-face. The administrator knew of “no opportunity. There’s no option. I know that the GED, I guess if somebody wanted to do that and then enroll in community college, they could do that. That just wasn’t what everybody needed...they just needed a diploma.” The student-participants listed a number of careers including criminal justice, creating video games, and varied careers in medicine to the military and business careers, all of which required a high school diploma as the first step.

Limiting factors of age. An administrator asked the all important question for this group of students regarding overcoming the age limitations for high school. If you’re 25, how do you go back to school? How do you go back and get a diploma? She pointedly stated that they cannot be “blamed” for their dropout decision, but “they see now that this is what they needed.” They now understood the importance of a high school diploma.

Importance of a high school diploma versus a GED. Administrators’ and teachers’ perspectives, in general, supported the views of student-participants. As they began working with GNM students, they realized that many students were primed and ready to do the work for the diploma. As they continued their work with students, they understood that some were not ready to be successful in a program like GNM. However, for those participants who were close to completing credits for a diploma and did not want to waste all the work they did in high school, administrators and teachers appreciated the choice these students made to try a more rigorous program than the GED. Teachers and administrators were cognizant

about what was at stake for these students: a chance to complete their educations and improve their career and social opportunities for themselves and their families.

A few of the students shared that they could not enter the military without a diploma, and they believed they would be frowned upon with only a GED. “I know that there are several students who wanted to enter the military, and they have to have a diploma versus a GED. And, I think some of them did not like what the stigma a GED brought with it. I mean they know enough to know that having a diploma is better than having a GED.”

One of the teachers discovered many of the students wanted a diploma rather than a GED because to them “it just wasn’t the same...they didn’t see it as equivalent and there are certain things that you can’t do with just a GED; you have to have a high school diploma.” What they did not realize about the GNM program was that they would have to attend school online each day and turn in assignments, just as if they were in traditional high school. Their thinking was faulty when they understood the diploma was not going to be handed to them. “They had to work at an education.”

One of the administrators heard much of the same. The students and student-participants were “adamant about getting a high school diploma...they just didn’t feel like the GED had the same value as a high school diploma.” It was interesting to hear this administrator’s belief that the GED and diploma were equivalent. The administrator went on to express the belief that holding a GED to enter college did not matter. What mattered was the college degree. However, the student-participants stated their research told them they had to have a diploma to be admitted to some specific studies as well as the military.

Another administrator made observations about age, leaving school, and returning to high school at a later age. While working with the students and participants, the

administrator noticed when students dropped out of high school at an early age, the students and student-participants were somewhat carefree. “This will all work out somehow.” However, as the administrator talked with older students, things were not working out “somehow” and it was time to get the diploma. “I’m gonna do something about it...I’m gonna take care of this.” Maturity and age have reversed the “pushed out” effect, but the administrator stated that “by the time they realized what they needed, they didn’t know how to get a diploma. They didn’t want GED. A GED wasn’t going to do it for them.” As some of the participants state, a GED was not going to allow them to advance in their careers or move into their desired college studies, like nursing and criminal justice.

Outside GNM, the only option a dropout in New Mexico had was a GED. As one administrator stated previously, there was “no opportunity.” For these student-participants, the GED just was not good enough. Because it was not good enough, the participants did not pursue the GED. This administrator expressed her frustration at the state of education in New Mexico for dropout students. They are over age, cannot go to a traditional high school, and are doomed to be dropouts forever.

We’ve got a whole group of people here who needed some life experience to understand what it was that they missed out on and for whatever reason...They see now that this is what they need. Aren’t those the people that we would want to support?...Because you didn’t do it when you were 18, well, you’re now forever a dropout? You are never going to be able to be educated again?

The students wanted better lives for their families and have goals and dreams for themselves. The administrator’s support reached out to the GNM students realizing that they were motivated to earn their diploma and be better citizens in the community not relying on social welfare and contributing to the tax revenue locally and nationally.

That improves our revenue base. These are people who can contribute to society, and the more education they have and the better jobs they find, and the less, the fewer people we have living with government assistance, the better off we all are.

Table 7 lists the factors that prompted student-participants to return to online education instead of a traditional face-to-face high school program. From the student perspective the reasons encompassed making life better for themselves and others. The administrators and teachers heard similar reasons for returning to an online program to complete their diploma. Their observations also included the lack of readiness of many students for online education but they were resilient and persistent and some were successful.

Table 7. Summary: Factors prompting dropout students to return to an online program

<p>Stuck in life: Some student-participants returned to high school when they realized they could get no further in life without a diploma. They returned to improve their quality of life.</p>	<p>“My future is not steady yet because I still haven’t finished high school. And once I finish that, you know, we got all these open doors. And, now we don’t have any open doors because I haven’t got my high school diploma yet.” Jose</p>
<p>No age restrictions: New Mexico law prevents students over the age of 19 from returning to a traditional high school. For the student-participants there was no other option to return to a traditional program other than the GNM program for diploma recovery. Only one student-participant was able to meet the age restriction and returned to the traditional high school for only one semester course to complete graduation requirements due to the GNM program closing. GNM is open to all ages.</p>	<p>“I moved from Idaho to New Mexico and the I found out that over the age of 19, there’s really nothing out there that you can do in the area that I’m in...there was really no place for me unless I wanted my GED and I kept telling them I wanted to finish high school...In New Mexico, they never offered anything like that until Graduate New Mexico came.” Rebecca</p>
<p>GNM is cost free: Because student-participants had no job or low paying jobs many did not have the financial ability to pass for GED preparatory programs or online classes. The GNM program is free of cost.</p>	<p>“I mean when you’re not working, it’s hard, because \$20.00 per test, and there’s what five tests to take. It’s \$100.00...I don’t have \$100.00 to spare...there’s not funding for it or anything like that.” Patience</p> <p>I went to it wondering how much it was gonna cost and that’s when I saw that it was free...” Sally</p>

Table 7 Continued

<p>Job improvement: Job improvement led many students to return to the online program for high school diploma recovery. Their employment situations were driving forces.</p>	<p>“Because I was working, because I was busting my ass and I was like, can’t do this anymore, got to get my diploma, I have to move on.” Antonio</p> <p>“I have not really been able to get a job here, or anywhere, really. No one will hire me.” Sahi</p> <p>“Now, even though I have some of that experience, nobody will touch me because I still do not have a diploma or GED.” Sally</p> <p>“I’m working weekends and that’s it, that’s my life...I haven’t finished school and I have to suffer the consequences.” Jose</p> <p>“To be a manager, I have to have a high school diploma...I’ve got to have that piece of paper in my hand.” Patience</p> <p>“A lot of it was their job...they couldn’t advance anymore.” Teacher</p> <p>“They realize that without a high school diploma they can’t get a good job. They can’t advance.” Administrator</p>
<p>Sense of urgency: A number of the student-participants dropped out in their senior year of high school and were within reach of graduation. They did not have many credits to complete graduation requirements.</p>	<p>“When I found out I was just like two credits away from making it, from getting my high school diploma, I figured, you know, I have to hurry up and finish this, tri and do this. Get this obstacle out of my way.” Maria</p>

Table 7 Continued

For self and others: The student-participants who were parents particularly wanted to be positive role models for their children. They wanted to keep up with their children. They also wanted to improve their quality of life.

“Because I didn’t want my kids to tell me, ‘Mom, you never stayed in school, why should we?’ And they were getting to be that age. Getting to see my middle one graduate, that was, I guess, what really did it. I was like, ‘Gosh, she’s graduated, and I haven’t graduated. That’s pretty sad.’” Christie

“They’ve been working in minimum wage, dead end jobs, so they thought this was the way to move ahead. A lot of 'em were to provide better support for the family.”
Teacher

GED not an equivalent credential: There were some mixed beliefs about the equivalency of the GED and a high school diploma among the student-participants. Overall, many student participants believed they would rather put in the time and effort to earn their diploma. They did not want to be seen as quitters or slacking off taking the easy way out. Many had accumulated many credits in high school and did not want to throw away those efforts.

“Because most of the jobs that I tried to apply for, like in the Criminal Justice field, they always said to have a high school diploma” Sandy

“For me, A GED is like a shortcut...And for me getting the high school diploma was actually doing the work to get it...And I’m proving to them that I could get my high school diploma, and I didn’t take the shortcut.” Rebecca

Graduate New Mexico standards and classes were a lot harder than GED classes...I would rather go for my diploma...I don’t think it can compare.” Tommy

“I think some of them did not like what the stigma a GED brought with it. I mean they know enough to know that having a diploma is better than having a GED.” Teacher

Table 7 Continued

<p>Pursue career dreams: the student-participants had career dreams that ranged many categories from earning their diploma to medical, engineering, and business careers.</p>	<p>“I wanted to join the military...they said in the military they’ll take a GED if you’ve taken like a few college classes, too, but I didn’t wanna do that. I wanted to get my diploma.” Kelly</p>
	<p>“I’m gonna do biotechnology, but I also wanna do business...I definitely want to own my own business.” Mike</p>
<p>Entry to college: Many of the student-participants talked about finishing their high school diploma so they could pursue a college education.</p>	<p>“I want to move to Tokyo, and I want to become a video game designer for PlayStation.” Anna</p>
	<p>“I want to go to college...the support I need is continuing my education like going to college and following my career.” Juan</p>
	<p>“That’s been one of the things that is getting to me, that I hadn’t finished, I haven’t finished, so I can’t go on with college like I want to.” Mary</p>
	<p>“Some of them said they wanted to go to college.” Teacher</p>

Summary. The student-participants experienced a moment in time when they knew they had to return to school for their high school diploma. For many student-participants, there was a sense of urgency to enroll in GNM once they knew the program was available. They enrolled to satisfy a need for them, to have a sense of accomplishment, as well as, for the members of their families. The age limitation to return to school was a limiting factor for many student-participants and impacted their self-esteem and socialization.

The student-participants were clear about their need to have a diploma and did not believe the GED credential was equivalent to a diploma. The student-participants held goals

and dreams about special career paths. Their goals included college, or helping with a family business, or just a career change. However, many student-participants could not achieve their goals and dreams without first having a high school diploma.

The teachers and administrators understood the future plans of their students. Many wanted a better job or to go to college. However, they also saw a lack of online readiness in the students. One of the teachers counseled students about the GED program and moving on to the community college as another option for them. But, they clearly heard that the students wanted their high school diploma and not a GED. The GNM program was the option they wanted.

Research Question 3.0: What factors do High School Dropout Students Returning to School Believe Help Them Complete an Online Course in a High School Diploma Program?

Success factors in the GNM program. When I asked the student-participants to identify the success factors in the GNM program, there was no hesitation in their answers. The student-participants answered enthusiastically, some with a number of success factors. All student-participants, but two, had never taken any kind of online instruction before their enrollment in the GNM program. Two students, Tommy and Adrian, observed spouses taking online courses in higher education which led them to believe the GNM program would work for them. Tommy found he was comfortable with the program online while Adrian was not happy and declared that he would not continue in an online setting.

Later in this chapter I addressed the obstacles and barriers some of the participants experienced while in the GNM program. The obstacles and barriers identified could be potential success factors if modified or corrected.

The creation of the GNM program. One success factor identified was simply the creation and implementation of the GNM program. Participants looked for opportunities to complete their high school diploma but found no programs other than the GED program.

Rebecca shared her beliefs.

I just wanted my high school diploma. I tried everywhere. I tried asking the schools if I could take night school. They don't have anything...But, in New Mexico, they never offered anything like that until Graduate New Mexico came.

As discussed earlier, these participants did not want a GED, did not believe in the strength of equivalency between the two programs, and did believe their reputations as portrayed to an employer or their children would be much stronger if they had an actual diploma. The GNM program was a second chance to recover the opportunity they lost in their high school years to earn a diploma.

The importance of the GNM program. The participants spoke of how important the GNM program was to them from two perspectives. First, the GNM program gave them the second chance they needed to complete their high school diploma and overcome the mistake of dropping out. Second, they spoke of how disappointed, even enraged, they were that such an important opportunity was taken away from them as a result of the GNM program funding cut.

Kelly and Tommy spoke to the importance of GNM from the perspective of the classroom situation and the state's standing academically. Kelly, who was just a few months away from the high school setting at the time of interview, believes that online education was a better way to complete classes because online eliminates chaotic classroom environments. "I think that every year, it's getting worse and worse because kids are getting worse and worse...people don't pay attention, and the teachers can't control the classes. It's like

actually people who want to learn versus people who are going to school to get some parties in and all of that.” Tommy’s opinion of the importance of the GNM program came from the news he heard about the state of the school system.

I think it’s very important. On the news you see yourself how all these kids are falling behind in school. Our school system is not really that great but yet they cut funding for a program that helps adults get what they didn’t get when they were adolescents...You would think they would keep this program so maybe like it would maybe not make us look so bad.

Kelly’s and Tommy’s statements spoke to the failure of the school system and sounded like a prediction of more dropouts to come. The GNM program was a reactive solution to the dropout rate.

Lilly was on the downhill slide when the GNM program came along. She had failed the GED test and “literally had given up. I said, ‘No. No more.’” After enrolling in GNM and earning her diploma, Lilly stated that “without it [GNM] I don’t think I would’ve gotten my diploma.”

Like Lilly, Jim was one of the few participants interviewed who completed his credits and earned his diploma. He believed “it was a great program that could have helped a lot of people.” He continued to express his views about the importance of the GNM program.

New Mexico has a pretty high dropout rate. I know there’s a lot of adults that want to finish, but there’s no other way, there’s not a way. Like me, I thought there wasn’t a way, not until I found this program, because really without this program there isn’t a way. I mean, I could get a GED, but like I said, I felt that was almost taking the easy way out.

Mike’s opinion was that the GNM program “definitely opens up the opportunity to do it” [earn a diploma]. Mike saw the GNM program opening doors for him and restoring his self confidence.

It showed me that I could do it. When I found out about it going away, I felt disappointed because there's a lot of a missed opportunity for other people. We're in a state where there's a lot of people that didn't finish high school, for whatever reasons.

Brianna wanted her secondary credential to say "High School Diploma." The program was important to her because, "I wanted to go through the classes and not just take one test and be like, 'Okay, you passed.' I actually wanna do every single class to get to where it was. Like actually high school."

Susie followed up by stating, "16 year olds have other options. Past 20 years old there are not other choices." Important success factors for Susie were the safe environment of the online class. She was not judged or embarrassed if she makes a mistake, but could correct her error and move on. She believed that many people do not understand the dropout student. Susie wanted to see the GNM program return so that she and other dropouts could have a better life and "feel better about themselves."

Rebecca and her daughter studied together. She felt proud of herself for taking on the task of learning, being productive with her life, and her children were proud of her also. She attributed the importance of the GNM program to "bringing her family together and it also brought me to getting better self-esteem." The GNM program was important to her because it freed her from the "worry about daycare and [I] don't have to worry about the gas money" or missing work. Rebecca also looked at the importance of GNM from an economic perspective. "The more people that finish school, the more opportunities there are for them... You have more educated people that are going to technical school or to colleges, and they are getting jobs for their family and not have to depend on so much public assistance."

The comments addressing the importance of the GNM program continued with everyone adding something. Juan believed “everyone needs to graduate in the life...” Antonio talked about the mistake he made dropping out but “we want to know that we can get another chance, a second chance to do good to finish. To be able to be somebody in the world.” Mary did not want to see herself “without a diploma” anymore. Rosanne and Sally both wrote to the current governor but have little hope that their comments will be heard. Sally’s hopelessness is expressed when she states, “I’m sure it’s just another email message that got deleted.” The importance of GNM and the anger regarding the closure of the program were summed up for this group of participants in Sally’s words.

If I was looking for the easy way out, I wouldn’t spend a year trying to get my diploma, but my diploma is important to me. I’m not trying to take the easy way out. I’m willing to do the work... You know, I had as in all of my classes. At least I can say it wasn’t me and that’s what I put into that letter to the governor with that. The government made this decision for me. It wasn’t me this time that gave up, like the first time.

Again, students have been “pushed out” of the educational system. This time they have been pushed out at the hands of their state government. For this group of participants, it was clear they have learned from their experiences that followed dropping out. In an effort to improve their situation, they found no program available to them except the GED, which was unsuccessful for some and unwanted by others. What made this program such a success for the participants?

Design factors of an asynchronous online program.

Convenience. The GNM program was an asynchronous online program. The characteristics of an asynchronous online program were identified positively as success factors by the majority of participants. The anytime, anywhere availability of their

coursework was identified as a success factor. The participants were able to access their coursework anywhere there was an available computer. Juan stated, “Online meant doing it anywhere at home or anywhere I had a computer.” Tommy added, “Knowing that you can log onto your account and do your courses anywhere. And, knowing that it’s there 24-7. And you can log on whenever you want to initiate your courses.” Patience liked the fact that she could study “pretty much any time of the day, I could do it, you know, and so any time of the week.” The “anytime, anywhere” accessibility of the coursework was a “convenience” for Christie.

Because I could do it at my convenience. 'Cause I don't sleep well in the middle of the night, and so it was really easy for me to do stuff in the middle of the night, early in the morning when no one else is up and things.

The fact that the entire design of the GNM program was totally online was a factor of success. It eliminated transportation to an educational site and relieved the parental obligation to find babysitting. Brianna believed that the GNM program was successful for her from the time she enrolled because “It was that I could do it on my own time, and that I didn't have to go anywhere and I didn't have to pay for a babysitter...And, then, I don't have transportation either, cause it's hard, because when I did the GED, my classes were 8:30 at night and there was no busses then. Lilly liked the GNM program “because it was online. My husband and I only have one car, and it's very hard to coordinate.” Rebecca found that she “didn't have to worry about babysitters or gas money to get to the class. I just had to turn on my computer and sit down...”

For Mary success meant that she could access learning from her own home. “You don't have to drive nowhere, so that was one of the things that made it easier.” Maria agreed with Mary. “It was more convenient for myself to do it from home.”

Pacing. The GNM courses were bound by an 18 week timeline. If a student needed more time to complete a course because of extenuating circumstances, the 18 week deadline was extended, in many cases, as reported by the participants. After the initial log-in to a course and introductory activities, each participant was asked to create a pacing guide. The pacing guide helped to keep the participants on track with their work, meeting deadlines for turning in homework as well as taking tests.

Because the pacing guide was created with each individual in mind, the participants were not obligated to be in class for a specified period of time each day. If they needed to skip a day due to other obligation, they could do that and not lose footing in their class. They could work in 30 minutes of study time here and there during their day. When I asked Maria what she liked about online courses, she responded by saying that it was

More like your own speed, your own time. If you had time to login and do it for at least five 30 minute lessons, at least you knew you had that time to squeeze into your day and do it at your convenience.

Lilly had a similar response. “I could work at my own pace, so whenever I had a free moment I just got online...”

Brianna, who self-identified as a special education student, believes the best thing about the GNM program was that she “can finish it on my own time.” The online experience gave her the time to process class material that she did not have in the traditional classroom. Tommy, who was identified with a special needs problem after he dropped out, articulated one of his difficulties in the traditional classroom was that he needed more time for understanding the class work and could not get it. Using the GNM program, Tommy found,

I was going to be able to do it on my own time and at my own pace because I feel that sometimes in a classroom setting, like my experience in school is the teachers go at the teacher’s pace and a lot of the students move forward but then there are some

students that don't move forward that need extra help. And with Graduate New Mexico, I am able to go at my own pace..."

Learner interaction with an asynchronous program. As the participants worked through their courses they interacted with the teachers, their families, the course content, the technology, and their peers. Interaction was the communication and support the student-participants received while enrolled in the GNM program. Student-participants found varying degrees of success in each area of interaction and communication.

I was curious to find out what the students expected an online course to be. Except for one student who had previously taken an online course through IDEAL-NM and a few participants whose family members were taking online courses, no one knew what to expect.

Student-teacher. Learning happens in many ways and is influenced by the environment and structure where the learning takes place. In a traditional classroom, the teacher and students were face to face providing structure to the classroom, controlling the pace of the lesson, student focus, and providing clarification and feedback instantly. In contrast, in an online asynchronous learning environment students were autonomous. Their attention may drift, and there was no one to re-focus them. Support from the teacher to clarify a concept or answer other questions regarding their studies came in a different form and not instantaneously.

All the student-participants needed some level of communication and support from the teachers to help them in their studies. The participants' satisfaction and levels of success differed depending on their communication with and support received from teachers. The amount of communication and support, the timeliness of the communication, and the quality

of the communication proved to be a success factor for many of the participants in this research.

Instructor-student interaction was the communication between the teacher and student. Interaction or communication with the instructors in this asynchronous environment took the forms of email, telephone calls, written feedback on assignments and evaluations and, in some instances, face-to-face meetings. Students were expected to check into their course(s) on a daily basis; teachers could check each student's attendance. If the participants did not check in for a number of days, the teachers sent emails reminding them of their attendance requirements and deadlines to turn in assignments.

Mike mentioned the email he received when he did not check in during a time when the GNM site was down. There seemed to be some miscommunication or lack of communication within the GNM program. It was a teacher who emailed him during this time to tell him his attendance was "subpar". Coupled with this report of subpar attendance was the fact that the participants experienced some technical issues emanating from the GNM system, of which the teachers were unaware. However, when the teachers were aware of the downed system, they were encouraging to the participants and warded off any discouragement or frustration the participant might have developed. Rosanne found herself in this situation and relied on her instructor for help. "...the computer system for Graduate New Mexico, it would always go down, and she (the teacher) would say, 'Okay, just keep moving on. Keep moving forward. You can come back to this'...it was awesome that I was able to do that."

The three full-time teachers interviewed for this research were all core academic teachers. The participants spoke of two of the three full-time GNM teachers with positive

accolades. Direct contact with teachers through email and telephone were identified as a success factor. John mentioned that the teachers

clearly listed on all of their profiles, 'If you have any questions, call me.' I think I did do a lot of emailing back and forth when I had questions about navigating the system or about any kind of research project that was due, and they gave me a lot of good feedback.

Alicia agreed with John and stated, that "You have direct contact with the teachers and you can talk to them through email."

Rebecca liked the idea that teachers were "actually there to speak to, like a live person. It wasn't some operator." Alicia found the instructors "very helpful because they gave me direct instructions." Mary used the word "awesome" to describe her teachers. When I asked Mary what she would do when she was having trouble understanding a concept or something was not clear, she answered by saying that she would "email them through the page... They always got back to me. They never said no to me, they never turned their back on me..."

Jim was working while enrolled in the GNM program. As a result, Jim's work situation got in the way of daily attendance. He emailed his teacher to discuss his situation and found his teacher to be "understanding of my situation and worked with me and helped me get through and get everything done on time so I could get graduated."

Rosanne believed her teacher was "fantastic". One teacher especially was "extremely encouraging. I could talk to her on the phone when I was stuck, and she'd be like, 'You're gonna be fine.' She was awesome." Of another teacher, Rosanne states, "She was very good, too, and would call me right back."

Kelly, one of the youngest participants and the participant who had only been out of high school for just a few months, found emailing with the teachers a bit cumbersome because there was no immediate feedback as she was used to in a traditional high school setting. “Sometimes it took them like a couple of days to get back to me, which wasn’t—I didn’t think that was ideal.” She found one teacher to take up to two days but “the other teachers were pretty good with their timing.”

Checking her grades was timely for Kelly and she found that to be a success factor. She was able to go online and find her grades generally the next day or two. However, getting her grades was not as important to Kelly as having the password to unlocking tasks such as the midterm and final. In her economics class “there was a password for unlocking the midterm and the final, and it took her (the teacher) a couple of days to get back to me on those.” Quick teacher communication was critical for Kelly.

Both Adrian and Maria found teacher communication to be a success factor. They both talked about the ease of getting in touch with their instructors through email and on the telephone. Adrian commented that “you could communicate with the instructor anytime you want, and they leave their phone numbers, emails and stuff like that. They’re always there to help you, and that’s a good thing.” Maria found that student-teacher communication was the biggest success factor for her. Her view of the online experience was that the communication between student and teacher facilitated her moving through her coursework and made the coursework “more accessible.” “You can communicate with the teachers through email and phone...you can just email her right when you’re doing the course and she’ll correspond back to you.”

Antonio spoke of his New Mexico History teacher with great satisfaction. Antonio was one of the students who had physical access to the GNM offices in Albuquerque and took up an offer from his teacher to meet face-to-face. “She was pretty awesome actually...She would help me a lot. She would actually meet with me, sit down, and have one on ones with me.” Antonio found his teacher to be both supportive and encouraging. He felt pressure to complete his assignments and worried that he would not finish by the deadline. The teacher “would talk to me about it and show me step by step, and tell me to take it easy or you know, just not to worry about it too much because then I worried about it ‘cause what if I don’t get it done.”

The interaction between the students and the teachers was important to the participants. Communication and feedback was cited as a top priority for them. This became evident as the discussions with the participants continued. A number of them spoke of how the lack of communication from an instructor impacted them, especially from one teacher.

Susie, a special needs student, found a lack of communication and social presence with some of her teachers.

They don’t know you personally; know your situation and what you need help on for like special ed and stuff. Like they don’t understand that I need more time or more reading or help with reading or understanding or anything like that.

Brianna’s perception of one of her teacher’s was that she was mean. “The teacher...she was kind of mean, so I really didn’t want to talk to her about it, but I had this counselor who helped me out. She helped me actually finish English, because I was gonna fail it.” Brianna continued stating that the IDEAL-NM teachers were “fabulous, but one or two of them was not really excited.” These words from Brianna demonstrate that the attitude of the teacher is evident in their communication and teaching practice, even if the teaching is

online. In addition, the teacher's attitude, that is, enthusiasm, particularly for this student population, affected the students' learning and ultimately, may affect their success.

Patience believed the "instructor interaction could have been a lot better....there was just like one-sentence responses to my questions...we didn't get really like a lot of feedback about what we did, so that was kinda hard." Patience had hoped for more positive feedback and positive constructive statements to improve her work. Teacher communication, personal attention, and feedback were success factors Patience sought in her student-teacher interactions. These factors facilitate student success, but Patience reports, "Even after I'd turned in the presentation, I mean she—I just got like a grade and that was it. It wasn't, it didn't really give you any feedback on the paper at all or anything like that."

Anna had mixed reviews about interacting with her teachers. "Some teachers weren't as helpful as others. Like if I had to ask a question, some were not as clear or as willing to get nitty-gritty and figure out what I was trying to say."

Communication with the teacher became an obstacle for Juan when trying to complete one class. He vented to his teacher that he had only heard from her two times—once when the class started and the second time when he told her she was not very "communicative."

In the past semester I had this teacher and I messaged her all the time and she never responded to anything. I never saw her in class. So, that kind of frustrated me. I sent her an email saying that and she sent it to the administrator and everyone else...that's when I heard from her that last time.

Lilly had an issue with communication with the same teacher. "They were all good about responding and answering my questions. The [one] teacher is the only one that I had problems with." Lilly was fortunate to live in the vicinity of IDEAL-NM, and one of the

teachers offered face-to-face tutoring for students in the lab. Lilly said the “science teacher was helping me with my homework because I couldn’t get a hold of my teacher. She refused to come down. I didn’t really care for her very much.” On the discussion boards, peer review was difficult because no one else was willing to review Lilly’s writing. After posting, Lilly would check to see if any of the students graded her work, and they had not. She stated the teacher “even gave me a zero on those assignments because I turned them in, but nobody had graded them.” Lilly was not able to complete the assignment without peer review. “The student hadn’t reviewed it, so I couldn’t finish it, and she gave me a zero. I had a hard time with [this] teacher.” Lilly emailed her and asked the teacher to review her work so she could complete her assignment. Lilly gave the teacher credit for reviewing and editing her work. How could this negative situation been avoided? Teacher monitoring the peer review of student work may have assured, in a timely fashion students’ meeting course requirements.

Antonio’s experience with the same teacher was similar to the others.

I just gave up on her. She didn’t help me at all and didn’t see me at all and didn’t see me actually progressing in that class because she didn’t. I will call her and the way she sounded kind of mad, I would call her too much, sometimes she wouldn’t answer her phone.

This anecdotal data illustrates serious concerns impacting the success of the participants. Participants’ comments demonstrated the importance of the teacher’s attitude, communication, feedback, and, in an online situation, increasing the social presence and decreasing the transactional distance between the student and the teacher.

Student-site coordinator. Because the GNM program is a statewide program, the support structure included educators who were site coordinators. Site coordinators included school administrators, counselors, or teachers, depending on the location and size of the

school. Most participants in the Albuquerque area were put in contact with a site coordinator at a local high school who assisted them with enrolling in the program. Others called the GNM office and were guided through the enrollment process. In the areas outside of Albuquerque, participants enrolled through the local site coordinator at their local high school. However, if a site coordinator was not readily available, the GNM administrators found a person to be the site coordinator at a high school in the participant's geographic area.

The job of the site coordinator was to promote the GNM program and enroll students in the program. Some site coordinators went beyond this description, offering help with technology and finding teachers on their staffs to tutor students.

Many of the student-participants had a good experience with the site coordinator in their area. The support a site coordinator gave to the student-participant was an identified success factor to help the student-participants complete classes successfully. Sandy lived in a rural community and could only get internet access at the local high school. Sandy's site coordinator and the high school staff provided support for her when she needed academic assistance. "Just having support with the school staff and the site coordinator...being ready to interact and answer all the questions to help me finish the courses successfully." Sandy also experienced technology access issues due to geographic location and could only access the Internet through the local high school two blocks away. The school had restrictions regarding student website access, and it was the site coordinator who worked with the school's technology department to allow Sandy access to the GNM program and the links within the curriculum program.

Sally's experience with her site coordinator, the school principal, was discouraging and disappointing. Sally had a large number of credits to make up before earning her

diploma and lives in an outlying area. She was passionate about earning her diploma and thought about getting a GED. While researching online GED programs, she found the GNM program. In her area there was no site coordinator. Sally was referred to the principal at an alternate high school in her area who questioned her decision to enroll in the GNM program and discouraged her from enrolling. Sally stated the principal told her that “it would be easier for me if I just got my GED and took some college classes because she told me that six college credits and a GED were the same as a high school diploma.” Sally went home to think about this but did not buy into it. Sally talked with a member of the GNM program and said, “She was helping me a lot. She told me, ‘No, if this is what you want to do, don’t give up.’” It took about two months for Sally to get enrolled and start classes.

When I asked Sandy what she thought was the primary factor that contributed to her success in the GNM program, she responded, “Just having support with the school staff and the site coordinator...Just having the staff on the online being there, and being ready to interact and answer all the questions to help me finish the courses successfully.”

Rebecca identified the help she received from her local high school teachers as a success factor to complete her classes.

I went to the local alternative school and the teachers were more than willing to help me if I needed any tutoring or if I needed any extra help, or if I needed to use the computers. They were very supportive in what I was doing which made things a lot easier.

Jim identified the site coordinator and teachers at the local alternative school in his area as most helpful. During his first semester in the GNM program, Jim connected with the “lady in charge” at the school.

[She] had a lab every Tuesday and Thursday where you could go in and look on the computers there. So when I wasn’t working I would utilize that every week, and that

was a very helpful tool, because herself and another teacher were there to help me if I ever had questions and things of that nature...It was like an open lab, and they had people there to help you with what you need help with.

As discussed previously, age was a factor for the participants. Jim was almost 30 years old and when asked about his age difference with other students present at the school site, he stated that did not bother him because he accessed the computer lab in the evening and usually there were only a few people in attendance. He was able to overcome the age factor to finish his course work.

Stacy was one of the participants who completed the required number of credits for graduation and graduated “on time.” Her site coordinators were two teachers at the high school who helped her enroll in the GNM program. Stacy explained an unusual offer made by the school should the GNM program go out of existence before she was ready to graduate. Stacy related that the teachers

worked really hard for me to make sure that the math credit that I’d already completed was counted towards my New Mexico diploma. That kind of made me more determined because they were working hard for me, so I wanted to work hard for them...She even told me that if I wasn’t finished with the classes, if the GNM program was no longer available, that they would pay to have my classes so I can finish. And those classes weren’t cheap.

Student-content interaction. The courses included in the GNM program were the same courses used in the IDEAL-NM program and were designed to meet New Mexico state standards. The courses were not written by the GNM teachers, but they had license to enhance the course work as they believed necessary for their students. Lilly stated that her teacher had “really good explanations, and he gave us multiple links to different websites, or slide shows that he had made, so that information was always available.” Textbooks were not used. Each online course was inclusive, providing a syllabus, links for study, readings,

homework assignments, projects, quizzes and tests to meet the academic expectations of each class. Tests were online and open book.

As I asked about their satisfaction or success with the course content, a number of divergent answers appeared. The participants talked about their excitement with the course and learning and the appropriateness of the content for high school level. They also mentioned the fact that their maturity and work experiences played into their successful completion of courses. There were some complaints regarding insufficient information on the course website to complete assignments or that there was too much redundancy within the course curriculum. Like most students, some found the subjects in a course more interesting or more difficult than others. When asked about her satisfaction regarding course content, Lilly said, ‘It was just a little bit of everything.’ Some were too easy like the Physical Education class she took but others were more difficult. ‘Spanish class, to me, was really, really hard because it’s just so different from English.’

Brianna was ‘excited’ to work on her GNM courses. ‘Like when I woke up, I’d be like, ‘Oh, I gotta finish my IDEAL-NM,’ and then I’d get on and then...I’d stay on for hours upon hours to do it.’ She felt the course content was ‘pretty good. Actually it had a lot of stuff that I learned, but I learned more because of it.’ Biology was her toughest subject, but she believed the teacher ‘was good’ and responded to her when she needed help.

Maria found the course content in her class to be ‘just about right...I didn’t think it was too hard or too easy.’ Alicia agreed with Maria, finding the course content ‘challenging and I think that is very awesome because it motivates me.’ Sandy found her class content immediately relevant

in knowing that I was getting information that I didn't know about the courses. And, being able to learn it and knowing that I could use those sources to help my little brother with his homework. Because he's in mid-school right now. He actually has borrowed my Pre-algebra notes to do his math homework.

Sandy went on to talk about her World History class. She is much more interested in math than history. Her first semester class was "challenging and boring at the same time." She completed it "even though I wasn't really motivated in that class. But, the World History that I'm taking now is more interesting and I'm able to get my assignments done right away." It was unknown if the difference between the two semesters was the content itself, the structure of the course, or the influence of the teacher.

Mike took a psychology course as one of his three elective courses needed for graduation. He found the content interesting especially when he "started relating or seeing it in everyday life. We have a dog and the conditioning that we did with her, the certain times that she eats...or when she hears the food...It was like, 'Wow!'" He found the content challenging and felt the course was more on par with a college level course. Mike found the content difficult to follow and contradictory from one unit to the next. "It contradicted some of the stuff that it said in previous units and stuff like that." Mike described himself as having a "business mind." He found his business courses much more interesting and easier. Another one of his classes, World History, was "just a lot of reading and writing." But, in the end, he felt his courses were at the 12th grade level.

Christie and Rosanne were two of the oldest participants in this research, each in her 40s. Each had raised families, and they were holding full time jobs. Each needed a diploma to advance in their careers. These ladies had been out of school more than 20 years. Maturity, work, and life experiences influenced their perspectives on course content and, in

Christie's case, played to her advantage. English was a challenging course, but Christie found the math class very easy.

For an older person, it was very easy 'cause it was consumer math. For a 17 year old, it would probably be a little challenging 'cause they wouldn't have all the life experiences already. That's what helped me with the math class. The English class was definitely a little challenging.

Angela found her course curriculum "very challenging" and eye opening. She was amazed at how much information was packed into each course as compared to the class content she remembered from high school. As a mom who pushed her children to excel, she now has great empathy for their struggles in school.

Very challenging, 'cause it's way up-to-date, and back in the 80s you didn't have half of this stuff. I look at my children in awe now after I've looked at that work, like, 'Wow, all this time I've been telling you guys, "What's wrong with you? Why can't you do that?' Now they're telling me, uh-huh, Mom."

Tommy, in his early-30's, had a similar reaction to the course content. "It was definitely a challenge for me because...I don't remember high school being this hard...but, to tell you the truth, it was a good experience because I was like, wow, I really must have missed out on all this stuff when I was in school." Tommy attempted the GED test and failed to pass. He acknowledged that the GED classes only prepared him to take the test as compared to "going back and learning."

Rebecca thought course content would be easy "because the Internet could be used to just look it up and get the answer right here." She found it was not that easy, and she had to put more effort into learning. "The way they worded the question and ask you and it has to be answered in a specific way and there is no one answer."

Sally and Jim both read *Beowulf*. It was difficult reading for both of them and Jim admits that essay writing has always been a struggle for him. Sally talked about the fact

depending on the course, her level of interest and challenge was higher in some than others. She did not find her English class one of the more exciting classes but stated she had a lot of “old literature that had to be read.” Being out of school for more than 10 years, Sally attributed her difficulty with the course content as “I wasn’t quite used to that anymore.” She had difficulty comprehending the old English and found herself re-reading passages multiple times until “the information I had just read sank in.” Jim found the course content in English both “interesting and challenging” but not overly difficult. “It was definitely a challenge; it wasn’t just something you could breeze through. But, it was intriguing, it wasn’t boring either. It wasn’t just like, oh, let’s get through this.”

John took four classes and was most excited about his art class. He described the class as “amazing” and “really cool.” He found the topic of the class piqued his interest to the point that he continued to research the topic and took a virtual tour of the geographic area he was studying. He was going to see a movie at his local theater which included the art he was studying. John realized that this class opened a world of learning to him that he would never have the interest to seek out on his own.

In contrast, Adrian found his classes and course content “boring.” He enrolled in United States History. When I asked him what made the course boring he responded, “Just having to read all that crap that wasn’t interesting.” Adrian enrolled in an art class. Unlike John, Adrian found it “weird.” He could not understand how the teacher could ask him to draw on the computer. He was not clear on exactly what the teacher was asking him to do. When I asked him if the instructions were to draw on the computer he answered, “No, I don’t remember what they asked me to do, but it was weird. I couldn’t understand it.” Adrian also took an English class, which he found “boring” also because “I had to read a bunch of crap. I

just didn't want to read." In this class there was a blog component for all those students in the class to participate in discussion. He found no value in this exercise. "It's hard to like think of something—the thing that I would say to another student, I'd be just like, 'Yeah, I totally agree with you'... I couldn't figure out what to say." Adrian found that online education was not for him.

Kelly, who missed four months of her senior year due to illness, was the youngest participant in the study and also found some of her classes "boring" but for different reasons than Adrian. Kelly was used to a more interactive classroom in which she could develop her opinions. She especially talked about her Government/Economics class.

Like for history, developing what your thoughts were on it instead of like memorizing names and dates and just like entering them in, not being like, 'How did this happen and what could've changed if they did it this way?' Like there was really no opinion in the work that I thought of, anyways.

In discussing course content success with Rebecca, she stated that the assignments were laid out well and she

understood them well and the research tools that they gave you, they gave you everything you needed, so there was no question about what needed to be done or where to find the materials. It was all there. They gave you all the information you needed.

Patience and Sahi, found some glitches in the curriculum. Patience took a class and called attention to the fact that the instructions for one assignment were lacking information. When she brought this to the teacher's attention the teacher dropped the assignment "because she even read it and didn't understand it. So, it was like that kinda gives you an insight of what I had to go through." Patience sounded impatient in her remarks but the teacher fairly evaluated the situation to give the students an advantage.

Sahi was only one of two student-participant who had experienced an online course as a high school student. As a high school student his experience with online education was “boring,” and the GNM courses were different. The difference was in the structure of the course. The GNM course content was presented in smaller chunks, so “each little section is really short, you’re not on it forever, and so it’s not as boring...” When I asked Sahi about his experience with the course curriculum, he replied in a mediocre way saying, “It’s learning, so I guess I can’t say it’s like really interesting, but it’s enough to keep my attention and not be boring.” He believed the curriculum was “all right for the most part,” but he found some articulation problems within the content. He spoke of his history class and said, “There’s information that I couldn’t find for certain parts, and some of the information you learned over, which makes no sense.” This seemed to be in stark contrast to Rebecca’s experience and may be a confound between different subjects or teachers.

Student-technology interaction. Because the GNM program was an online program, it was vital that students have a computer. It could be assumed that everyone had a desktop computer and Internet service at home to login to their class website, but that assumption would be incorrect. I asked each participant where the computer they used was located. The majority of the participants (18) had computers they access at home. Three participants had laptop computers. Lilly had a laptop to begin the program. Maria acquired a laptop computer to work through her classes. Rebecca had an older laptop that crashed from time to time. She went to the library to use the public computers when her laptop was non-operational. At other times, she went to her local alternative school to use the computers in the lab. Sandy was in a similar situation. She could not always access the Internet from home. She lived in a rural area and would go to town or to the local high school for Internet

access. At the high school, Sandy ran into school access restrictions and would have to request that the technology department give her Internet access, which often took a day or so. Alicia owned a desktop computer, but while she was taking GNM classes, she did not have Internet service. She went to the library to use the public computer and access the Internet.

In a similar fashion, I asked each participant how they used the computer when they were not doing GNM school work. Almost half of the student-participants admitted to using the Internet for social purposes. Facebook was popular among this group as well as Skype and email to keep in touch with family and friends. Other ways the student-participants use their computer was to pay bills, Google information, check movie schedules, play games, surf YouTube, look up recipes, and watch movies. Juan used his computer to search and apply for scholarships for college. Antonio created an anti-drug and alcohol video titled Yoapuedo-TV. John and Sally were very comfortable with computers. John worked on fixing a couple of old computers he had in addition to reading and researching for his classes, watching movies and playing video games. Sally worked with Word and Excel and said that “pretty much anything I can do with the computer, I try to do”. Christie used the computer to keep the books for her husband’s trash hauling business. Anna and Tommy were into computer art. Anna edited pictures in her spare time using Adobe Photoshop. Tommy, the tattoo artist, says, “I do tons and tons of art, painting and sculpting, building stuff like you have never, ever seen before.” He used his computer for media projects and photography, also. Maria used her computer only for class work.

From this information, it is evident that access to a computer is wide ranging among the student-participants. Except for those few who were dependent on Internet access at locations other than their homes, access anytime, anywhere holds true for these participants.

Education was accessible to them every day, all day. However, because the student-participants used their computers for a variety of purposes, it did not mean that all were able to manipulate the GNM educational website easily nor were the student-participants able to use the technology in an appropriate academic manner.

Manipulation of the course website must be considered as a success factor. Manipulating the Blackboard website was a success factor for a number of the participants as they found it easy to maneuver around this site, find the information they needed to do their class work, and return it to the teacher. Sally was able to “easily navigate my way through the Blackboard because, like I said, I’m good with computers. So, it didn’t take me anytime at all to get adjusted to that.” Anna described navigating through her course website as “really simple. I think they kept it to the bare minimum, and they gave you instruction if you didn’t know where to go.” John enrolled in four classes. He found no barriers to navigation and each site had a different appearance. “It was very easy, and I started off with four classes, and each one had a different look and appearance to it, but it was completely—I mean it was very easy, just like logging into a social networking site and just following the directions.” Mary described maneuvering her class site as “pretty easy.” Lilly’s description of her experience with her website was “very easy. It was easy to access, it was easy to explore. It was very functional.”

Jim found the website easy to navigate but sometimes “things were kind of hard to find but if you have any kind of computer knowledge then it wasn’t something that was impossible. He knew enough to copy and paste the address to a link in the URL address area to open the link he needed. When he started the GNM program he had equivalent knowledge as a young high student when he left school over 10 years ago. “When I was in school

computers were used, but not as much as they are now. So, I have as much knowledge as some young kids do.” But, his work gave him a good knowledge of computers, and he was able to find his way around.

Maria’s thoughts on navigating Blackboard included the need for patience. She found Blackboard to be ‘pretty self-explanatory but you just have to learn how to read and take your time in how you’re reading, try to navigate it. Because, if you actually read it right, it will take you where you want to go.’ She believed the reading level was adequate for an average person.

Juan found the website “hard” at first to manipulate. When he registered for his class he was told that someone at GNM would

teach me how to use a Blackboard but then they didn’t. I told them I knew about computers and they told me it was going to be easier for me to follow through it because I had experience with sites and stuff. It was kind of difficult for me at first because I didn’t know how to work it.”

Juan was a good example of a person who used a computer for a variety of applications but still had difficulty with navigating through an academic site. Brianna had a similar experience. She spent a week trying to get started. “I went like a week without going to work because I didn’t know where to go, so maybe more directions to how to get started to do your classes. How to get there.” But, like Juan, once she figured it out, “then I got used to it and it was soooo easy to do.”

When I asked Rosanne to describe the hardest thing about taking an online course, she responded by saying that it was “doing it online” and “adapting to the computer.” She had never maneuvered a computer before the GNM program. Rosanne made sure her children had a computer when they needed one, but never learned how to use it. It was her

children who helped her maneuver through the website and post emails. “And the hardest part was getting to maneuver through it...with all the help I got, they taught me how to get into this window and that window, and yeah, I learned.” However, communication and understanding of her skills by one of the GNM tutors regarding Rosanne’s computer skills was lacking. The tutor assumed she had the computer skills needed for the GNM program. While the tutor continued to tell her that she needed to learn to type, she continued to tell him she needed to learn how to use the computer. She used a laptop at the lab but had a hard time transferring her knowledge to her desktop when she arrived home. One of Rosanne’s teachers intervened and explained that she had very low computer skills. At the next tutoring session the tutor said “I didn’t realize you’ve never used a computer...I thought you were joking.” Taking the first step to learn to use the computer was the “shocker” for the GNM personnel. Rosanne persisted and learned new skills to complete classes.

Mike was the only participant who spoke about using technical assistance when there was a computer problem. He found the technical assistance to be supportive. “They would help me right away, or something would be fixed within about 24 hours.” Mike had experience as a customer service representative working technical support. He was very comfortable calling for help and understood the technician’s questions to help make the repairs easily and quickly.

Adrian was the one participant who threw up his hands in desperation and frustration. His wife was taking online courses, but her job requirements did not allow her to help him in any way. As he began his classes, he thought he could take his time, but the pacing guide and the 18 week timeline pressured him.

Then I don't know; it was just too complicated. I was like—'cause it said I had to converse with my peers or whatever, and I had to look stuff up, and my computer wouldn't look—wouldn't open pages that it's telling me to open, and I was just like, 'Wow, this is stupid.' So, I pretty much just quit that. I was like, 'This isn't for me. I'm not gonna do online stuff.'”

Adrian was also caring for his two small children who wanted his attention while his wife was at work. He did not communicate with his teachers, ask for technical assistance, and his teachers did not communicate with him to investigate his problems and intervene for him. He continued to explain about navigating the website.

It's kind of difficult, 'cause like it says you have to go to the Blackboard for reference and stuff like that, and then I guess the instructor leaves you notes every once in a while, every so often. You have to go back to the Blackboard to know what your next assignment is and stuff like that. I don't know. And, then I couldn't figure out like if I was done with the first course or if I had to move on or whatever. It wasn't really that easy to navigate through.

Like Maria, Adrian needed patience but never developed the virtue. His difficulties navigating the online program resulted in Adrian developing high frustration levels.

Administrators' and Teachers' Perspectives of Factors Related to Success in an Online Program.

Importance of the GNM program. In getting to know her students, one teacher found that even though the students have deficits in the cognitive, social, and technology areas, this program was important to them. “These adults are craving [education]; they want it.” The grass-roots community bought in to the GNM program and the outreach to drop out students. The teacher's educational philosophy is based in Freire's belief that education is liberating and powerful for the uneducated and poor. Education transforms those at the grass roots level. The teacher described the importance of this program as “power.” “There was definitely community but in terms of our support at the ground-level outreach to these

students. There was definitely power in that and power in the students wanting to be part of this program—wanting more education—wanting access to opportunity.”

GNM engaged community partners to help reach out to dropouts and offer support for their students. Two community agencies that were brought into the mix were Youth Development Inc. (YDI) and eRead Inc. One administrator said, “I think it’s important to engage communities, for example, eRead has a lab where students could go and work on their courses if they didn’t have a computer at home. They could get tutoring and support there.” None of the participants I interviewed mentioned these organizations as support systems for their course work and completion.

The teachers and administrators also recognized the importance the students put on earning their diploma instead of a GED. When I asked one teacher about the importance of the GNM program and its strong points, the response was, “It’s an opportunity for students who have dropped out to pick up their education and get the high school diploma; get something more meaningful out of their education than just taking a GED test and getting that certificate...They didn’t see it [GED] as equivalent, and there are certain things that you can’t do with just a GED.” As another teacher stated previously, the GNM program was an “alternative besides getting a GED. They really wanted a high school diploma.” One of the administrators learned from student interaction that once many of the students had some life experiences, they realized they “couldn’t get what they needed without their high school diploma that even a GED would not suffice even to go to the military.” When talking with students, an administrator heard repeatedly, “I don’t want my GED. I need my diploma.” This was echoed in the statements from many of the participants. They had aspirations and goals that only a diploma could help them achieve, such as a career in the military. They

wanted to do the course work and did not want to throw away the work that had already been done.

Convenience. The teachers and administrators agreed that one of the success factors for the students was the anytime, anywhere aspect of the GNM asynchronous online program. The participants were not bound to be online from a start to ending time, as with a traditional school day. One of one teacher's older students was a truck driver. "He liked that he could go to truck stops and pull out his computer and login" no matter where his truck route took him. This teacher was aware of the obstacles many of the students faced, such as jobs, child care, and transportation issues. The "anytime, anyplace option" made these obstacles a nonissue. Another teacher shared an example of anytime, anyplace access to education.

I think they liked the fact that they could be online at 11:00 at night. I'd be up online, and one of my students would be sending emails like, 'Oh, I'm online, too.' You know, it's 11:00, and we're chatting back and forth...It wasn't school hours, by any means, like it would be in the high school, on the online courses.

An administrator had a similar outlook from experiences with the students. "They're struggling. They have two jobs. They have kids so the ability to be able to work on their courses anytime, anyplace, any space, you know, that's a benefit." This administrator understood that if the students had to attend class on a regular basis, as traditional high school is set up, that would present challenges leading to the student not attending class. "It was very appealing that they could work on their course any time so the asynchronous nature of the learning environment I think was important."

Pacing. The self-pacing factor of each GNM course helped keep each student on track. However, teachers had to define exactly what self-paced meant. One teacher

identified the self-pacing aspect to each course as a success factor with caveats. “We always had to define what [self-paced] meant, because it’s self-paced but that doesn’t mean you get six years to do it.” Several of the students saw the self-paced term with boundaries as a contradiction.

One of the teachers spoke of pacing in terms of his students’ comparison to a traditional high school classroom. The teacher believed that they preferred the online, self-paced factor over the traditional classroom because “they realized that they could do it more on their own time or when they had the opportunity. They didn’t want to be in a classroom with other people...They would do it on their own was probably one of the motivating factors.”

Student-teacher interaction. One teacher talked about teachers communicating with students even into the late hours of the night. That communication happened because of the online nature of the GNM learning setting. Teacher communication, tutoring, and support were identified as success factors by teachers and administrators.

The teachers and administrators also talked about teacher communication in terms of teacher support. One of the teachers believes one of the biggest items for student success is support. “Not only support from home or family to continue your education, but then a place where they can go to have access to the technology because it’s a poverty issue.” Many times students would tell this teacher that their Internet access was shut off due to lack of funds. Educating them on alternative places to access the Internet was part of each teacher’s teaching.

This teacher held face-to-face tutoring sessions in the Albuquerque IDEAL-NM center two days a week from 4:00pm to 7:00pm. During that time he had only four or five

students who came to see him. They worked on an assignment or fixed computer problems. Even though the numbers were small, those few students benefitted from his help. “For those, just having somebody there that they could talk to and show 'em, that’s all they needed.”

Participants talked about one particular teacher who was always encouraging to them. One teacher was readily available to the students and met with them online, through email, on the telephone, and even face-to-face. Another teacher talked about face-to-face tutoring sessions. “We offered live brick and mortar tutoring sessions that they could come to here.” However, this teacher is the teacher the students complained was least supportive and refused to meet face-to-face with some students. This teacher said that tutoring sessions were also offered through Blackboard. “They could ask questions, and we could walk them through and show them screen shots and things like that. So, I think those tutoring opportunities were critical for some of those students who did find success.”

One teacher saw herself as the students’ “cheerleader,” viewing the students as having to overcome the issues surrounding their lives and their dropout status. The teacher described this as overcoming their “boulders and dragons” whether real or imagined. Students would slide up and down, depending on the boulder or dragon they were dealing with at any given moment. The students did not have those extrinsic motivators, such as being on the football team or going to prom, to keep them motivated. The teacher saw herself and the other teachers and administrators as the constant presence in their lives to help them overcome excuses. “It was more like, well, I’m gonna be here when you come back. Focus, because I’m here. You can do this.”

One administrator believed a success factor of the GNM program is the teacher support afforded to the students. “They’ve got the support of their instructor who can assist them through video conferencing and desktop sharing.” Teacher support emanates from teachers caring about the student. This administrator sees success in this program because “everybody involved with the GNM program that I encountered truly cared about this particular population of people.”

Student-site coordinator interaction. One teacher attributed success for some students, especially those who lived in rural, low income areas, to support received from the site coordinators. Referring to students from Zuni, New Mexico who were very poor and had to go to the local high school to use the computers and access the Internet. Their cultural commitments and their status as single mothers with child care issues interfered with keeping up with their class work. The teacher says, “They had a very good site coordinator, and she was very supportive. She would call them, she would try to keep them going, keep them coming in.” The teacher found these students to be “persistent” when completing all their assignments, resulting in passing grades. Another teacher talked frequently to a site coordinator in rural western New Mexico towns who knew all the GNM students and their sons and daughters in the local schools. The site coordinator would keep “eyes on them” to continually encourage students to complete class work.

There were other site coordinators who did not take to heart the students’ success as some did. One teacher found other site coordinators who “thought they were just gonna sign ‘em up and, okay, you’re pretty much on your own once you’re signed up.” The teacher suggested a weekly report from each site coordinator to explain how they supported the GNM students.

Another teacher discussed that the cadre of Regional Student Outreach Support Specialists (SOSS) could have been a greater help to site coordinators suggesting that they could be the gatekeepers in the rural areas and provide regional support centers for students to come to for tutoring and access to the Internet. “Within those different regional education centers across the state we could [have] supplied them with Internet access and the student could come to that regional education center or go to the local school.” Both administrators stated that regional support was being developed when the program was shut down. One administrator recalled

“The way the Graduate New Mexico program was structured is we were supposed to have hubs across the state, so we had people that could work with the kids that were in the region to support them and in some areas they did that really well, and some areas they didn’t so.”

Another administrator followed up with the observation “that we didn’t have a chance to develop our regionalization support the way we had envisioned.” This is a reflection of one teacher’s beliefs that the GNM program was ill planned and implemented too fast.

Student-content interaction. From the participant discussion, the student-participants’ interaction with the content was not difficult for many. Others relied on their teachers for tutoring and support to get to course completion. Some student-participants took one or two classes while others enrolled in six courses. This was a huge course load for a student-participant who was working or had children to care for. The student-participants talked about reading *Beowulf* and *The Scarlet Letter*. Although the participants liked these novels, it was difficult reading considering many had not read a book of this type in years, and those with reading deficits struggled. One teacher pointed out that many of the students had cognitive, social, and technology deficits, which impeded their progress because they

had difficulty understanding instructions, used text messaging language in an academic setting, or had difficulty manipulating the technology. Another teacher, mentioned that the courses came readymade, and part of the “job was also to enhance the courses and make them better.” The feeling about the content was one of disagreement “with the way they were made because it was just doing technology; it wasn’t doing content for the science as you normally teach... We [the teachers] found a lot of flaws in how they were developed.”

Technology interaction. When I asked student-participants about their ability to maneuver around the course website, most found their way. Some of the student-participants found if they worked through the tutorial online and had patience they were able to access the information they needed on the course website to complete readings, assignments, take tests and quizzes, and access grades. There were a few that needed individual attention from the teachers to find their way around; a very low number of student-participants found maneuvering the website to be so challenging that they became discouraged and did not finish their coursework.

The teachers noticed that many of the students needed to be taught academic etiquette and skills when using the technology. A teacher believed many of the students were able to navigate the course websites. “I think students were able to get it, you know, click through it.” The teacher does advocate for the front-end tutorial preparatory course for the students. “It’s one thing if you have a cell phone or a 3G mobile phone, and you can click around on the Internet there, but it’s another thing when you actually are sitting in a course.” Another teacher found her students’ online skills “were very low.” This teacher saw a lack of skills and etiquette in her students’ writing and emails. An administrator found that technology skills were lacking. “We have 26, 27-year-old students though who are not as fluent with

their technology as we would expect them to be...They don't have the savvy that you would expect them to for the 26, the middle 20s...the fluency isn't there in terms of what to do with the tools and just the natural I click here.”

The teachers experienced a large amount of plagiarism from the students because “it is easy to go Wiki-something and cut and paste it.” At the instructors' level, they took an online course from the K-12 IDEAL-NM program and “transferred” it into the GNM program “as if it can plaster on to this population,” as the teacher stated. This teacher understands this population well. These teachers also shared students and talked about a student's plagiarism from one class to another. From the teachers' perspectives, students did not realize the teachers talked with one another. Another teacher stated that plagiarism was something the teachers battled with all the time and was common to some students.

Like plagiarism was a huge one for us that we were constantly bucking against and what constitutes plagiarism, and just because I got busted in this class didn't mean I got busted in this class plagiarizing so my teachers are never going to talk to one another and I'm going to plagiarize in this class now. She's caught me, but he hasn't.

Consequences for plagiarism were not disclosed, only “we have to figure something out.”

One teacher understood that the instructional design of one program may not meet the needs of the population these teachers were working with. The instructional design for the GNM program must be designed around the needs of this population which are not the same in the IDEAL-NM on campus high school program. The teacher advocated looking at adult learning theory when designing courses for this program. Or should there be a blend of adolescent and adult learning theory? The teacher described the population well.

We had a core group who were supposed to be in the Class of 2011, supposed to be in the class of 2010, supposed to be Class of 2009. We had some core with them, but then we also had students who have been out of high school since the '90s or the early '80s. Although we think they are adults, they look like adults, their birthday is an

adult birthday, cognitively they're still at a 16 year old level in brain development from when they left school. Their lobes have hardened.

A simple example of one teacher's observation of technology etiquette and skills was just in the email addresses the students were using. The teacher received email addresses such as "juicy22@hotmail" and "blazeitup69" instead of a more academic email such as "joe.student@hotmail." The teacher attributed this lack of etiquette and skill to the fact that these students left school early and never had the appropriate technology training for career readiness in high school.

Another teacher's observation of student-technology interaction was similar to a peer teacher's. This teacher saw a "technology gap" in the students because they dropped out of high school. "They don't have the technology skill 'cause they got left behind, and they haven't kept up with technology. They can't type, they can't—they don't know how to work their way around the Internet. Some of 'em did. Some of 'em can. Some of 'em got better. I think that was the purpose of the program, to not only bring them up in their technology skills, but also just their reading and writing skills."

Overall success. One administrator touted the fact that GNM had a 75% pass rate and attributed this data to the rigor of the online coursework. "We had a 75% pass rate with Graduate New Mexico this last semester, so that's pretty darn good when the national average is around 70%." This would indicate that the students were able to move through the course work relatively easily and/or the teachers were exceptional at enhancing the curriculum to make the content and assignments fit the students' needs and ability.

Student-participants did tell me that even though they had to work harder than anticipated, they praised the teachers for their help and found the content challenging. When

considering the special needs of some student-participants, the years away from school for a large number of student-participants, and the selections of readings, was the content appropriate for these students or was it too difficult? One student-participant shared a story of failing a class because of the time crunch just before the program shut down because she could not read *Beowulf* and understand it quickly enough.

Citing the 70% national pass rate, a rate representing all students in virtual education nationally, not just dropout students, raised questions about the reliability of comparing the national rate to GNM's 75% pass rate. The teacher stated,

You really have to break that down, because none of the zeroes were factored in there [GNM]. The students who got a zero percent, literally a zero percent, were not figured into that pass rate. So, the pass rate of those students who at least logged in and submitted an assignment, the 75%, but that doesn't speak to 300 or so that we registered and they never logged in or never submitted an assignment.

It appeared the administrator was measuring pass rate on a national level, all virtual school learners, while the teacher was focused on the pass rate for the GNM students. For the success of this program, the pass rate for the GNM students was more telling about the success of the program. The administrator stated that 20 students earned their high school diploma out of 500 enrollees for the short time the GNM program was in operation. Four of the 23 student-participants I interviewed completed course work and earned their high school diploma.

Table 8 outlines the factors related to success as identified by the student-participants and some of the exceptions. Within the table are outlined the broad categories of success factors. Each category was broken down further to better understand the nature of the category. Student-participants identified a number of specific success factors within each category. Table 8 also identifies exceptions that were not success factors. Some of these

were identified by the student-participants and some were identified by the administrators and teachers. The exceptions fall in the purview of the teacher no matter who identified the item as an exception. If the program had been allowed to evolve, these exceptions might have been turned into success factors for the GNM program.

Table 8. Summary: Factors of Success

Category	Factors of Success	Examples
Importance of the GNM program	The program itself An opportunity many were seeking	<p>“I just wanted my high school diploma. I tried everywhere... They don’t have anything. But, in New Mexico, they never offered anything like that until Graduate New Mexico came.” Rebecca</p> <p>“Without GNM I don’t think I would’ve gotten my diploma.” Lilly</p> <p>“It was a great program that could have helped a lot of people.” Jim</p> <p>“Definitely opens up an opportunity do it [earn a diploma].” Mike</p> <p>We want to know that we can get another chance, a second change to do good to finish.” Antonio</p> <p>“These adults are craving [education]; they want it.” Teacher</p>
Convenience	Anytime, anywhere Totally online Eliminated transportation and babysitting issues	<p>“Knowing that you can log onto your account and do your courses anywhere. And, knowing that it’s there 24-7.” Tommy</p>

Category	Factors of Success	Examples
Pacing	Keeps students on target Students learned time management and organizational skills	<p>“It was that I could do it on my own time, and that I didn’t have to go anywhere and I didn’t have to pay for a babysitter...And, the, I don’t have transportation either, cause it’s hard...” Brianna</p> <p>“It was free, there was no charge, and it was convenient online stuff that I could do. I didn’t have to go to a classroom every day.” Christie</p> <p>“I think they liked the fact that they could be online at 11:00 at night...I’d be up online and one of my student would be sending emails...It wasn’t school hours, by any means, like it would be in the high school...” Teacher “I was going to be able to do it on my own time and at my own pace because I feel that sometimes in a classroom setting, like my experience in school is the teachers go at the teachers’ pace and a lot of the students move forward but then there are some students that don’t move forward and need extras help. With Graduate New Mexico, I am able to go at my own pace...” Tommy</p> <p>“I was learning at my own pace, and I could sit there and read it all over again...If I didn’t get something, I would go back and read it again because I knew I had the time...” Mary</p>

Category	Factors of Success	Examples
Interaction with teacher	<p>Support using email, telephone, video conferencing, desktop problem solving using Blackboard, face-to-face tutoring</p> <p>Quick feedback</p> <p>Tutoring help</p> <p>Cheerleading</p> <p>Able to check grades quickly</p> <p>Uninterrupted attention from the teacher</p>	<p>“They realized that they could do it more on their own time or when they had the opportunity... They would do it on their own was probably one of the motivating factors.” Teacher</p> <p>“You have direct contact with the teachers and you can talk to them through email.” Alicia</p> <p>“Extremely encouraging. I could talk to her on the phone when I was stuck, and she’d be like, ‘You’re goona be fine.’ She was awesome.” Rosanne</p> <p>“She was pretty awesome actually... She would help me a lot. She would actually meet with me, sit down, and have one on ones with me.” Antonio</p> <p>“For those, just having somebody there that they could talk to and show 'em, that’s all they needed.” Teacher</p> <p>“It was more like, well, I’m gonna be here when you come back. Focus, because I’m here. You can do this.” Teacher</p> <p>“They’ve got the support of their instructor who can assist them through video conferencing and desktop sharing.” Administrator</p>
Interaction with site coordinators	<p>Some were very helpful</p> <p>Helped students with enrollment</p> <p>Found tutors for students</p>	<p>“Just having support with the school staff and the site coordinator... being ready to</p>

Category	Factors of Success	Examples
Interaction with content	<p>Provided access to computers and Internet</p> <p>Helped solve computer and Internet access problems</p> <p>Encouraged students to come to use high school facility</p>	<p>interact and answer all the questions to help me finish the courses successfully.” Sandy</p> <p>“I went to a local alternative school and the teachers were more than willing to help me if I needed any tutoring or if I needed any extra help, or if I needed to use the computers. They were very supportive I what I was doing which made things a lot easier.” Rebecca</p> <p>“They had a very good site coordinator, and she was very supportive. She would call them, she would try to keep them going, keep them coming in.” Administrator</p>
	<p>All information on the course website</p> <p>No added textbooks necessary except in one class</p> <p>Course work rigorous and challenging</p> <p>Course work appropriate for high school level and students’ level of learning</p> <p>Engaging, short study sections to hold students’ interest</p> <p>Reading level was adequate for many students</p>	<p>“Really good explanations and he gave us multiple links to different websites, or slide shows that he had made, so that information was always available.” Lilly</p> <p>“It was definitely a challenge for me because...I don’t remember high school being this hard...but, to tell you the truth, it was a good experience because I was like, wow, I really must have missed out on all this stuff when I was in school.” Tommy</p> <p>“...They gave you everything you needed, so there was no questions about what needed to be done or where to find the materials. It was all there.</p>

Category	Factors of Success	Examples
Interaction with technology	Most students had computers at home	They gave you all the information you needed.” Rebecca
	Most students had Internet access at home	“Each little section is really short, you’re not on it forever, and so it’s not as boring...” Sahi
	Tutorial provided to maneuver websites	“It was definitely a challenge; it wasn’t just something you could breeze through. But, it was intriguing, it wasn’t boring either.” Jim
	Easy to maneuver the course websites for most students	“Just about right...I didn’t think it was too hard or too easy.” Maria
	Easy to access the course websites	“It was easy to access, it was easy to explore. It was very functional.” Lilly
Overall statistical success	Easy to explore the websites	“Pretty self-explanatory but you just have to learn how to read and take your time in how you’re reading, try to navigate it. If you actually read it right, it will take you where you want to go.” Maria
	Websites were functional	“They [technical support] would help me right away, or something would be fixed within about 24 hours.” Mike
	20 graduates, August 2010 to March 2011	
	4 graduates were interviewed for this study	

Summary. The student-participants identified the GNM program itself as an important success factor for them. The GNM program gave them the opportunity to complete their high school diploma with the anticipation of fulfilling their goals and dreams. The convenience of enrolling in classes and studying at home allowed student-participants to study when their schedules permitted. Studying at home created a safe haven from bullying and teasing peers. The pacing guide taught student-participants task and time management skills in order to complete classes in the allotted time frame.

The most important success factor identified by the student-participants was the interaction between the students and teachers, in some cases, between students and site coordinators. This interaction fostered communication so that student-participants knew they could count on academic help in a safe environment when they needed it. Feedback was timely and constructive. Student-participants complained about the lack of communication or feedback from one teacher. This is an important point because it illustrates how important teacher communication and feedback was to these student-participants.

The student-participants found the curriculum at their level and believed there was enough rigor and challenge to the courses to increase learning. Only one student-participant found the curriculum boring and a few others found some irregularities that could be remedied.

Technology interaction was successful for most students. Several needed some help maneuvering the course websites and received help from the teachers. For some student-participants in outlying areas technology was not consistently working. This made learning and completing lesson difficult for these student-participants. They had to find other sources for Internet connectivity.

The administrators and teachers prided themselves in the communication they had with the student-participants. They touted the fact that there were community partners ready for students to use computers or come for tutoring. They also realized the importance of offering the GNM program to the students when students told them they did not want a GED. They also noted the anytime, anywhere convenience factor and self-pacing helped keep students on track. The administrators and teachers, like the student-participants, touted their communication with the students as the greatest success factor.

Administrators and teachers found the students lacking in cognitive, social, and technology skills. In addition, academic etiquette lacked when maneuvering the course websites. Plagiarism was a factor in many written assignments. Many of these deficits were thought to be because the student-participants left school early or had been out of school longer than when computers were introduced into the schools.

The overall success rate from the administrators' perspectives was that the students maintained a high pass rate. However, the teachers did not agree with the statistics, citing the fact that those students who received zero grades were not taken into account.

Research Question 3.1: What Resources Help Students Successfully Complete an Online Program?

Resources: aids to program completion. In my discussions with the student-participants, I inquired about the resources and support they had or needed to be successful in the GNM program. Their perceptions of online education before beginning their studies in the GNM program demonstrated a lack of knowledge about asynchronous learning. Only two participants had taken part in online learning prior to the GNM program. One took E20/20 classes in high school. Another took a Spanish class from IDEAL-NM while still in

high school. The realities of online education became evident to the participants as they matriculated through their classes. Either directly stated or implied in their interview responses, all participants identified resources and program support systems that became factors in their successful experiences in the GNM program.

I included a discussion of student perceptions and realities regarding online education. An objective review of resources and support needs for successful completion may clarify, verify, and de-mystify student perceptions. Once codified, these success factors could allow participants to enter into their studies with eyes open and staff more effectively to pinpoint their outreach efforts.

Perceptions and realities. John, Christie, and Verna perceived online education from the context of their experiences. John worked on computers and knew his way around websites; he did not believe he needed any special or extra resources or support. Christie stated that she thought “it was gonna be just about like it was.” Verna, thought “it would be really helpful for me” to take an online course. “I didn’t really like expect anything from anyone...”

Tommy and Adrian both had spouses taking classes online at the college level. Tommy had a fairly good idea of what to expect. “I kind of expected what my wife was taking because they have an online blackboard...” Adrian, who decided online education was not for him, thought his experience online would be like his wife’s experience. However, it became clear in our discussion that she was enrolled in a synchronous class, and he was not. “I thought it would be a little bit more easier like to—than like sitting in a class and stuff. Like I figured maybe there would have been like an instructor, like a video on the

instructor or something, telling you what assignments are and stuff like that. At my wife's college, she had an instructor where she had to listen in on the class and stuff..."

Mike's perceptions were similar to Adrian's noting that he expected the class would have a synchronous nature about it.

I thought it would be like a chat room with a bunch of people and a teacher, then we would do the assignments and turn them in, stuff like that. And, maybe that's how they were at one point; maybe there's some kind of classes that are like that, but that's how I thought it would be. I thought it would be like a class environment, like just at a regular time every day.

Mike's information came from a friend working at the graduate level who was taking synchronous classes. He was very interested to know if a synchronous class could be available to him when he gets to college.

Lilly's perception was in line with Mike's, except she expected learning would take place on an individual level, face-to-face through video conferencing. "I thought there would be a lot more classroom assignments, like where you sat down with the teacher, use like a video conference, more like a chat room. That's what I kind of expected."

Kelly believed that the GNM classes would be like taking a Rosetta Stone class. "...like I've taken Rosetta Stone like to learn like a language, but I thought it was gonna be like that, like you just click in a box and press 'next.'"

Juan's goal was to take classes. He perceived that it would be different but did not know in what manner. "I don't know what I thought it was gonna be like. I wasn't really measuring it in my head or anything. I just wanted to take the courses."

Anna, who dropped out because she was sick most of her life and was caring for a sick mother, did not know what to expect but was pleasantly surprised by her experience in

classes. “I really didn’t know what to expect. I didn’t expect it to be as good as it was...it was a lot simpler than I thought it was going to be.”

Sally’s perceptions indicated increased academic challenges, in contrast to Anna. “I don’t really know what I was expecting. I didn’t really expect it to be as challenging as it was, but that was more just the material in the classes, not so much the taking online.”

Mary had no idea what she was getting into. It just “sounded easier, it sounded better...but I had no idea what it was gonna look like.” Maria also had no idea what to expect, but her perception was that online classes would be harder. “...My cousins had taken courses for college online and they said they were a little bit harder than regular, than when you actually go into the classroom. And, I didn’t know what to expect.”

Rebecca’s perception and reality were at opposite ends. “I was scared to death. I was scared to death just about everything; I just didn’t know what to expect. I didn’t know if it was going to be hard, or if it was going to be easy...I thought it was actually going to be hard because it was just me and the computer.” Her fears were allayed. She found it to be easier than expected, using the Internet to help research her papers, links provided in the curriculum to help complete assignments, and help from the GNM teachers.

Some of the participants learned that the reality of being successful in online education comes from within the students. They identified personal characteristics such as self-discipline, desire, and focus, as success factors when taking an online course.

Juan mentioned that an online student needs “to do their work on time and continue getting online and taking courses continually” to be successful. To be successful, online students “need a lot of concentration” and self-discipline. Sahi found his reality in online education was self-discipline, also. “Just keep myself doing the work.” Brianna found self-

discipline, concentration, and a desire to succeed to be success factors for her. She knew procrastination would be her downfall.

I just had to push through, you know? I can't really say, 'I'll just do it tomorrow. I'll do it tomorrow.' Because the deadline's gonna come up and then I have like three assignments, and I'll fail. So, I had to—even though—if I was sick, I would still have to do it, even though. Then I would just go back to bed after I did it.

Kelly's thoughts were similar to Juan, Sahi, and Brianna. She said she has to keep herself “accountable to get the classes done...it takes a lot of motivation.”

An external motivator helped Anna to stay focused and on track. Anna had to force herself to study “just ‘cause I knew that I needed that job so bad.” Maria knew that even when she did not feel like studying she had to “because I know if I don't do it I'm never gonna get what I need to get done done.” Jim spoke of his self-motivation to complete his studies and graduate. “It was really a lot of myself just wanting to get it done, and knowing that it needed to be done to the way I wanted to go with the things that I wanted to do.”

Considering the participants' perceptions and realities, it was indicated that an orientation course to asynchronous online learning could be a success factor. Many of the participants began their studies with no idea or misconceptions of what an asynchronous online course would entail. Those participants such as Juan, Sahi, Brianna, Kelly, Anna, Maria and Jim discovered early in their studies that internal self-discipline, self-motivation, and focus were personal characteristics necessary for course completion. An orientation class with an added student screening component addressing the necessary personal characteristics necessary for success in an online course might help students understand what it takes to achieve in an asynchronous academic environment and complete a course. As in Adrian's case, asynchronous online education was not for everyone.

Family, friends, and teachers as a resource. When I asked participants about resources and support they needed to complete their studies, a number of them immediately talked about their families, friends, teachers, and site coordinators. These people were the safety net that kept them going.

Tommy felt comfortable contacting his teachers when having trouble with his work. He used his teachers to help him understand content. “First, I contact my teachers if I need any help if it’s my work.” In addition, Tommy found his wife to be a resource. She was able to help him with technical problems such as where to post an assignment if he did not understand the directions in an email. As a tutor in some respects for Tommy, she would read aloud the directions clarify their meaning, so he would understand how to proceed with assignments and online tasks. She helped him navigate the website and assisted him with such tasks as posting his homework in the correct place. This type of differentiated learning supported his success because Tommy was a poor reader, being diagnosed with Scotopic Sensitivity after he dropped out.

Sally’s family was a resource for her to continue her studies. Her family members would make sure her children did not interfere with her studies. “They were very supportive and would help me as much as they could as far as, Mom has to do homework now, so it’s time to play [in your room].” Mary’s husband and mom were the supportive resource in her life, like Sally. “My husband supported me a lot. I had him, and my mom has always been there for me and told me I had to go to school and finish because she didn’t finish, but she wants me to do it.”

Like Tommy, Antonio’s wife was a resource for support and motivation to complete his diploma. “She tells me, I don’t want you to be a loser the rest of your life, and I want you

to support us. I want you to be the man that I need, you know.” Lilly spoke of the support her husband as her resource to keep going through her courses. He was the one who encouraged her to continue when she wanted to give up.

My husband actually helped me a lot this last class, or I would have given up on it...I just wasn't understanding it. It didn't make any sense to me, and he pushed me and would hold my hand, and he talked me through it. He was very helpful with the household chores and cooking and stuff.

Patience lived with her grandparents and paid them rent. When the GNM program became a possibility for her, Patience's grandparents allowed her to put the rent money towards a telephone and internet service. “They told her to go ahead, get your phone; get your internet going, and just worry about that. Take care of your schooling.”

Rosanne, a widow, had her children to be a resource for her. Their friends and their teachers also became resources to help her learn the computer skills she needed to complete her courses. As one of the oldest participants and being out of school longer than most of the participants, Rosanne experienced some anxiety about completing her work. Rosanne's daughter is graduating from college and her friends would help Rosanne study. “Some of her friends would come and help me, so I got some tutoring from the students from my daughter's classes...I just kind of recruited...as many people that would help me...proofreading the papers that I knew I wrote wrong.” Rosanne's daughter and sons helped her learn some necessary computers skills by setting up an email account for her and showing her how to determine who an email was from and how to reply and post an email. One son, while attending high school, would ask his teachers for help for his mom. Teachers from the high school called Rosanne and assured her that she was on the right track, offering

encouragement and tutoring. Rosanne was very appreciative of all the help she received from her children, their friends, and their teachers.

Rebecca and her children would study together. When Rebecca did not understand a concept, her daughter was her resource. “And, it became helpful, too, if I didn’t know something, my daughter would help me. She would help me look on the Internet, and she taught me how to use it, and it just became a learning process for all of us.”

In contrast to the positive support resources offered to these participants, Adrian had the opposite. Part of his frustration and giving up on online education was the fact that his wife worked long hours, was not home when he was home to study. As a result she could not help him with his technical and navigational problems. In addition, while he was trying to study he was also the caregiver for his children. He mentioned that his daughter continuously was “screaming” for his attention, making studying impossible for him.

Previously, I discussed the importance of GNM teacher communication and interaction with their students. The GNM teachers are examples of resource and support for the participants. When there was a problem, the participants knew they had immediate access to their teachers through email and telephone. Some even found access to face-to-face tutoring with these teachers. Site coordinators and teachers in the outlying areas proved to be a resource and support to those participants. Without family, friends, and teachers inside and outside the GNM system as a resource and support for continuing education, these participants may not have accomplished as much as they did. Family and friends as a resource is a success factor in their lives.

Technical resources. Technology resources included not only accessing the learning website and navigating the site but also solving technical problems. A few of the student-

participants talked about using the technical support resources afforded them through the GNM program.

Mike had some technical problems and did not hesitate to call for technical support to continue his class. His problem was fixed within 24 hours. When I asked Mike about the kind of support he needed, he spoke not only of the academic information he needed to be successful but “the ability to find technical help,” which aided Mike in completing his diploma.

Lilly spoke of a technical problem that impacted her photography class. She was not able to access the class when she logged in. “It showed that I was enrolled on it. When I clicked on it, it came up blank. There was nothing there. So, the technical team had to fix it, and it took them about a week and a half.” The technical team was an important resource for her to be successful in her class.

Previously, I related Rosanne’s story about her technical problems based in part on assumptions made by the teachers and technicians that she already knew how to use a computer. Once they understood that they needed to teach her computer and navigation skills, Rosanne’s studying commenced. In other cases, I discussed the fact that a number of the participants found it difficult at first to access and navigate the course websites. In Brianna’s case it took her a week before she could actually begin her course work.

Part of the student screening and placement process may be to assess computer skills. It follows then that a component of the orientation program was to make sure that all students, regardless of age, understand how to access and navigate the course website. It was important to identify technical support as a success factor in online learning.

Textbooks. Mike, Sandy, and Rosanne spoke of textbooks as a resource for learning. In Mike's psychology class he believes that he needed more information and did not feel he would have been successful in that class without his girlfriend's textbook. "I honestly wouldn't have gotten through that class if I did not have my girlfriend's psychology book...I got most of my help through that actual book itself." Mike continued his comments about the information found on the course website which contained typos and misspellings. "It was hard to follow; like I always found myself going back and rereading both parts of the material."

Sandy asked for textbooks and more practice problems. "'Cause I have this book that's for Pre-Algebra, and it gives me notes on how to understand the problems that the thing talks about. It doesn't have that much in it but it sometimes helps me out in my classes."

Rosanne found the physical book helpful for her studies. However, it was not a book provided by GNM. Her high school age son relayed a message from one of his teachers to his mom. "Tell your mom to get the book. Go to the library, get a card, and go get the book. And, she'll go back to that computer with a different outlook."

Actually my son got me to pick up the book, and then he says, 'When you read it and then you get on the computer, it just brightens it up.' And it did, and that's how it got me back I into, 'Ok, now I can do this.' I could read it and do it and I can still—you know you can still see it and touch it, and kind of give you that 'book' feeling."

These are only three participants who believed a textbook was valuable to them as a resource for successful studying. These student-participants range in age from late teens to early 40s. So, age does not seem to have an impact on the need for a textbook. However, for

the student-participants to be successful there was a need for a resource center and library references, so that students can access additional physical materials to help them study.

Tutoring. Tutoring was mentioned by a number of students as a resource they needed. Even though the GNM program is an asynchronous program with an expectation that all teaching and learning will be done over the internet, some students needed face-to-face tutoring. Some educational sites offered that to students, including the GNM office in Albuquerque. The Social Studies teacher met face-to-face with students. The Science teacher held open labs to help students with their course work. In discussing teacher communication with the participants, it is quite clear that the syllabus posted by each teacher included their email and telephone number for tutoring access. Many students took advantage of this availability.

Face-to-face tutoring was important for Kelly because she mentioned this need several times during our conversation. When I asked her what kind of support she needed, she said, “probably a tutor, just for back-up. Someone I could call and meet with if I was having trouble.”

Susie was classified as a special education student before she dropped out. She stated she needs “understanding instructors” because she has difficulty with reading comprehension and spelling, especially in classes such as Biology and English which have a lot of reading.

Verna found face-to-face tutoring in the alternative school in her local area helpful, which she identified as a helpful resource for her. “It was either the counselor or whoever was supervising the lab that they could help with whatever was needed on any subject.”

Alicia did not hesitate to ask for tutoring when she needed help. “When the class work was really hard, I would find other resources like tutors and stuff.” Alicia had a successful experience with a math tutor while she was still in high school.

Tutoring, whether through email, over the telephone, or face-to-face is a resource for the participants to help them achieve successful course completion.

Administrators’ and teachers’ perspectives of resources needed to complete an online program.

Perceptions and realities. From the student-participants’ perspectives many of the participants did not know what to expect when they entered the GNM program. They did not understand the nature of online asynchronous education imaging everything from something like Rosetta Stone courses, to spoon fed education, to general fear of what they were getting into. Only a couple of student-participants entered the GNM program with eyes wide open to what their experiences were going to entail. One student-participant had prior experience in the IDEAL-NM high school program and another took part in E20/20 before he left high school.

A teacher’s perspective was that they “saw it [GNM] as an easy way to get something that they don’t have. I don’t think that they thought that they were actually going to have to work for it...” Another teacher’s perspective was similar.

Some of 'em got in, and they started classes. ‘I didn’t know we had to do this online.’...And, that’s what bothered me, too, is that a lot of 'em were just signed up without any information about what the program was about, how they needed to do it, and the support that comes after it—somebody to sit there by the computer and help them manipulate the course.

Family, friends, and teachers as a resource. The participants identified one of the biggest success factors for them was the support they received from family, friends, and

teachers. Children helped parents get through course work, husbands and wives helped spouses manipulate the websites and clarifying instructions to complete and post assignments, and teachers, both in the GNM program and outside of it, all contributed their support and talents to help the participants' complete classes. Support from everyone was essential.

One teacher discussed his extra support for students as manning the computer lab so that students could walk in and have face-to-face tutoring. From the teacher's perspective "just having somebody there that they could talk to and show something that was enough." This teacher also believed the students who had active site coordinators, who kept after students and helped with tutoring, were the most successful. "The ones that were most successful were the ones that had support from their site coordinator." An administrator agreed with the teacher that site support is critical for the success of the students in GNM. "Site support is really critical... We have high success rates [and] it's because the schools have site support there and they do a really good job." The teacher agreed. "The students that were successful had site coordinators that were very involved, and checked on them, and pushed them."

In previous sections one of the administrators mentioned the importance of video conferencing and desktop problem solving through Blackboard. A teacher stated that she would meet with students on the telephone, through email, and at times, face-to-face as their "cheerleader."

Technical support. Technical support issues were described by teachers as connectivity to the Internet. One teacher found that her students had technical difficulties during the recent fires in New Mexico, which knocked out Internet service. Another teacher

found that some students had connectivity issues because they lacked the money to pay for Internet service or their service had been cut off because the monthly fee was not paid. The students were educated about access to the Internet from different places like the library and local high schools. This teacher believed the biggest factor for a student to be a success in the GNM program was support, not only from home and family, but “then a place where they can go to have access to the technology, because it’s a poverty issue”.

They don’t have the money to get their Internet. ‘Well my Internet got shut off, so I couldn’t come to class.’ You try to tell ‘em, ‘Well, there’s other places to go.’ They’re just not aware. They’re not informed about all the opportunities there are for them to work on their education.

Only a couple of student-participants spoke of using the technical assistance that GNM provided. The technical support system through GNM was not a pressing factor for the teachers and administrators as much as the importance of connectivity. One teacher spoke of support not only from a program point of view but also from the technology perspective. In New Mexico there were many areas that were rural, isolated, and very poor. “I think that number one in this state, being that we have such rural areas, access to broadband, access to a computer lab, is something that might not be unique to New Mexico, but we have a very rural and very poor state...Internet access was really important.” The teacher spoke more directly to technology support in the GNM program stating, that “There’s no 24/7 support here.” Another teacher saw Internet access as a stumbling block for many students. One day they would have it, and the next day they would not. The teacher advocated for a regional Internet access point that the student could go to or access at home.

Textbooks and tutoring. Although a few students mentioned they would like to have a physical textbook as a resource for their studies, the students were able to use the

information provided on the course website to complete tasks. Administrators and teachers did not identify physical textbooks as a resource for students.

The availability of tutoring by the GNM teachers was a priority for the students under the guise of teacher-student interaction. Most of the tutoring occurred via email, over the telephone, or on the desktop through the Blackboard system. As previously mentioned, two teachers held face-to-face tutoring sessions when they perceived a student need for it. The third teacher was less willing to meet with the students face-to-face yet said the teacher was available to them online or via email. However, many students had difficulty communicating with this teacher for help and feedback. The teacher understood the job but was surprised and shocked to discover the type of student in her classes. There appeared to be a weak relationship between this teacher and her students, unlike the other two teachers and their students.

Table 9 lists the resources student-participants identified as most important to them. From the administrators' and teachers' perspectives of student achievement, the administrators and teachers were in agreement with many of the suggestions made by the students.

Table 9. Summary: Resources needed to help students complete courses in an online program

<p>An orientation course: Many of the student-participants were unaware of the design and demands of an online course. They were also unaware of the personal traits and investment of time that were required to be successful in an online course. Several of the student-participants thought the GNM courses would be like the online courses their spouses or friends were taking, but they were not.</p>	<p>“I thought it would be like a chat room with a bunch of people and a teacher, then we would do the assignments and turn them in, stuff like that.” Mike</p> <p>“I thought it was gonna be like [Rosetta Stone] like to learn a language, like you just click in a box and press ‘next.’” Kelly</p> <p>“I don’t really know what I was expecting. I didn’t really expect it to be as challenging as it was, but that was more just the material in the classes, not so much the taking online.” Sally</p> <p>“I thought there would be a lot more classroom assignments, like where you sat down with the teacher, use like a video conference, more like a chat room.” Lilly</p> <p>“I think that the module on a tutorial prep of getting these students’ online learning environment would be been a great front-end piece to save time throughout.” Teacher</p> <p>“A lot of 'em were just signed up without any information about what the program was about, how they needed to do it, and the support that comes after it—somebody to sit there by the computer and help them manipulate the course.” Teacher</p>
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Table 9 Continued

<p>Support from family and friends: Student-participants reported their success was due to the encouragement and academic help from their spouses, family members, and friends. Some site coordinators did an exceptional job supporting the student-participants in their learning.</p>	<p>“My husband supported me a lot. I had him, and my mom has always been there for me and told me I had to go to school and finish because she didn’t finish, but she wants me to do it.” Mary</p>
	<p>“I just wasn’t understanding it [class]. It didn’t make any sense to me, and he [husband] pushed me and would hold my hand and he talked me through it, and he was very helpful with the household chores and cooking and stuff.” Lilly</p>
<p>Technical help desk: Because the GNM program was asynchronous and available to the students 24 hours each day, student-participants needed technical help 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Technical help was only available to them five days per week during working hours.</p>	<p>“Some of her friends would come and help me, so I got some tutoring from the students from my daughter’s classes.” Rosanne</p>
	<p>“The students that were successful had site coordinators that were very involved, and checked on them, and pushed them.” Teacher</p>
	<p>“It showed that I was enrolled on [the class]. When I clicked on it, it came up blank. There was nothing there. So, the technical team had to fix it, and it took them about a week and a half.” Lilly</p>
	<p>“I went for tutoring classes...They assumed I knew how to work the computer, and I didn’t know how to work a computer...[The teacher] actually talked to [the technician], and when I went back in for tutoring, he was like, ‘I didn’t realize you’ve never used a computer.’ I told him, ‘I told you that,’ and he goes, ‘I thought you were joking.’” Rosanne</p>
	<p>“Internet access was really important... There’s no 24/7 support here.” Teacher</p>

Table 9 Continued

<p>Textbooks: A few of the student-participants believed they needed a physical support textbook as a supplement to the material that was provided online.</p>	<p>“Actually my son got me to pick up the book, and then he says, ‘When you read it and then you get on the computer, it just brightens it up.’ And it did...I could read it and do it and I can still—you know you can still see it and touch it, and kind of give you that ‘book’ feeling...Go to the library, get a card, and go get the book.” Rosanne</p>
<p>Tutoring face-to-face: Teachers provided tutoring by email, telephone, and on the Blackboard learning management system. Both student-participants and administrators believed some face-to-face tutoring was necessary for the success of the students.</p>	<p>“I honestly wouldn’t have gotten through that class if I did not have my girlfriend’s psychology book...I got most of my help through that actual book itself.” Mike</p> <p>“Probably a tutor, just for back-up. Someone I could call and meet with if I was having trouble.” Kelly</p> <p>“It was either the counselor or whoever was supervising the lab that they could help with whatever was needed on my subject.” Verna</p> <p>“I offered to be in a computer lab...I started off from 4:00 to 7:00...Physically come in, I’ll help you with your class, I’ll help you with your computer issues. A couple of the, that’s all they needed.” Teacher</p> <p>“It wouldn’t be 100% online...I would want that face-to-face interaction...” Teacher</p>

Summary. One of the resources students identified as a need was to understand what an online asynchronous course entailed. The student-participants enrolled in the GNM course did not understand the demands on them, the rigor of the curriculum, or the benchmarks they were expected to achieve. An orientation class was indicated for the future to explain expectations of an online course.

Family, friends, and outside GNM teachers were the greatest resource the student-participants had. The technology presented some problems both sourced from GNM and from home hardware. The technology help desk for GNM was rated good but it was not available to everyone at all times of the day.

A few student-participants found that physical textbooks helped them. All student-participants touted tutoring from the teachers as their greatest resource to complete course work.

One teacher believed the students saw the GNM program as easy and did not have a good grasp on the reality of an online course. Another teacher stated that family and friends were the student-participants greatest resource. The biggest complaint teachers and administrators voiced addressed the lack of Internet connectivity in the rural areas. Internet access was a great resource for online learning.

Research Question 3.2: What Factors in the Online Program Will Help Students Succeed When Compared to Their Former High School Educational Experience?

Learning readiness. Many of the participants were satisfied with their online experience as compared to their high school experience in the classroom. A lack of readiness to learn and negative experiences with peers and school staff in high school were factors that online education limited. Rebecca shared that she liked her “online experience more than I did my real high school experience...it was a lot easier and my grades were better.” Brianna was so excited about her online classes; she would spend hours and hours completing her class work. After his tumultuous teenage years, Mike was ready to come back to school and says that he was ready to learn and “it’s something that I wanted to do. I was ready to learn. I was definitely more open to it, and I had more discipline and structure.” Self discipline in

an online asynchronous class is crucial to completing the course. Without self-discipline, focus wanders, assignments were not completed and failing grades were the result.

Eventually, the student drops out.

Rosanne, one of the older students who required a diploma for promotion, liked the challenge of online classes. “It might be a little bit harder, but the challenge is nice...I’m gonna have to learn to do it eventually, so it challenges me to not be afraid of it.” Self-pacing allowed Rosanne to learn at her speed, not the teacher’s pace. She can re-read or review material as much as she needs to master the material. Viewing her grades helped Rosanne build confidence and self-esteem as an online learner.

The participants found education in an asynchronous, online program met their needs as students in contrast to their experience in high school. Maria felt lost in a classroom of 25-30 students and found in the online experience that “the teacher paid more attention to you than actual high school.”

Susie’s high school experience “sucked.” She experienced bullying from students and rudeness from teachers. As a special education student, she had difficulty learning and had a high absentee rate due to illness. The online program allowed Susie to make up work on her timeline.

People were bullying me and just being mean and the teachers were just so rude and didn’t understand anything and since I have diabetes, I missed a lot of school, and they wouldn’t let me make it up, or they wouldn’t understand. And with IDEAL-NM, it was like if I’m sick I can just finish on time. There’s not a deadline the next day [for] homework.

Brianna had similar hurtful experiences during high school. She is emphatic and emotional about her high school experiences.

Oh my gosh, I hated high school...I never wanted to go to high school ever. I just went to just go see my friends, that was it. Like I tried my work, I tried in the beginning, but it was too hard...the teachers were bad and the kids were picking on me, and it was just bad. So, I just gave up. And, then this program came, and it was like, I don't have to deal with any problems, I could just do my work and that's it. And, I could just pass.

For Brianna, the GNM program was an opportunity to concentrate on her school work without the distractions from others. Brianna, like Susie, is a special education student. The online program helped repair her self-esteem. "I was focused on this...Every time I got a grade, I was so excited about As." And, her mom was proud of her. Academic competency built self-esteem and self-confidence in Brianna.

Lilly was another participant who found high school difficult. She described herself as shy with low self-esteem in high school. Lilly was diagnosed with dyslexia and ADD. As an adult, she no longer takes medication; she still has learning differences but has learned to cope with them. When asked how the dyslexia and ADD impacted her online education, she responded "that didn't impact me at all." The safe environment of online asynchronous learning helped build Lilly's self-esteem and allowed her to cope with her learning disabilities.

Kelly found difficulty with peers and pacing issues in her experience in a traditional high school. Her friends wanted to party. She found walking in the halls a safety challenge. "I hated going down the freshman hallway just 'cause kids are rude and like if you bump into them, they'll like want to start a fight or something...they have like street credit or something." Kelly identified her main problem in high school as individualized instruction; classes were not paced to accommodate individual students. She was ahead in some classes and behind in others.

Like if you were having no problems at all with one, and you could just slide through it, then you'd be finished in an hour and just have to sit there for an hour while other people caught up. Or, the other way around where you're having a lot of trouble, and you couldn't even like comprehend within like two hours, but everybody else was getting it. So, it just wasn't really like the best fitted for your needs, I guess. It's not individualized."

Kelly found the individual pacing of an online program fit her learning needs. She could complete a course on her timeline, finishing a course that was easier for her in a shorter period of time while spending more focused time on a class that required more concentration and processing to be successful. Alicia's comparison of high school and online classes mirrored Kelly's experience. "I constantly found them easier because I have my own time to study and there are not distractions, and by that I mean nobody in the class."

Sandy's high school experience lacked teacher attention and, ultimately, understanding. Competition for the teacher's attention was a frustration for her.

When I would ask for help from my teachers, they would come and help me but they would end up getting interrupted by other students, and then they would go and help them, and they wouldn't come back to help me.

The lack of teacher attention resulted from students' classroom behavior and the teacher's classroom management.

Because in the classroom the students would be yelling and they wouldn't listen to the teacher explain. And, the teacher would have to shout over the students to try and give all the instructions. But while explaining, they end up turning their focus on the students that's interrupting the class. And then it makes you lose your focus on what they're trying to teach you.

Sandy was the only student-participant interviewed who had prior experience in one of the IDEAL-NM programs. She took a Spanish class online prior to her enrollment in the GNM program. Between her initial online experience in Spanish and her enrollment in the adult dropout GNM program, Sandy moved to Arizona and was enrolled in a high school there.

She re-enrolled through IDEAL-NM when she moved back to New Mexico. Sandy believes the online program was a good fit for her and easier than classes in a traditional high school.

Like if I didn't understand it, I could go back and reread it, and then I would understand it. I didn't end up having to sit in the classroom listening to the teacher try and explain it and get confused with the other students. 'Cause that's how it was for me in the high school.

Alicia gave GNM a perfect 10 when comparing her high school experience with her online experience. "I could do it at my own time and stuff, and it's just so much better."

Several students had mixed comments comparing their online experience and their high school experience. Some found they preferred the regular high school experience over the online experience. Sally believed that her online experience was good but that "high school was more demanding...Maybe just because you had to be there in person," but she also found that when working at home there was no peer pressure.

Jim found his experience in high school and online to be "pretty much the same." He admitted that online learning takes self-motivation and a student must be self-driven.

Antonio has had two online experiences. One experience was while he was in high school with a program known as E20/20. This was an online credit recovery program implemented at the high school and runs during the school day. Students were scheduled into the E20/20 class as they would be for any other academic class. There was a teacher in the classroom to assist students. Antonio found the classes "boring" but "that was in a classroom with a teacher, and the teachers helped us...I finished them and everything, and here I'm at home, and it's not the same." In the GNM program, Antonio had his computer "by myself and I was just going to a different website, and that's not the school, and that's hard for me. It's harder for me to do it online than to be in class, and now it's even harder to

do it online because I don't have the right help that I need or don't understand something, I have to call the phone and it's not the same." Antonio identified that he needs close teacher support and supervision to keep him on task and to enhance his learning. He sees a traditional classroom setting as a better place for him but knows that setting is no longer available to him.

Juan, like Antonio, found that he likes the structure of the traditional classroom more than the online experience. "I think it's better to go to school than online because you can follow through more quickly." He found that he needed to be more self-motivated and self-driven, like Jim. Distractions were at a minimum in the traditional classroom. He found he could not "goof around that much, and you'll follow up on assignments quickly like how the teacher wants it." The structure of the traditional classroom appealed to Juan. The constraints, having to meet daily deadlines and face the teacher, helped Juan focus on content and manage his time better than online in an asynchronous environment. For both Juan and Antonio, developing internal self-discipline was an asset.

Verna liked the immediacy of the traditional classroom, getting instant feedback and support from the teacher. She liked being present in the classroom environment so that she can "see everything and ask what I need to ask and all that." In the online environment "if I need to ask something, and I need it to be shown to me, it's just not really there unless I go somewhere."

The participants identified a number of factors that helped them succeed in an online environment as compared to their high school experience. For some of the participants an asynchronous online learning experience provided an improved learning environment. Some found the classes online to be easier and achieved better grades. This may be because the

online environment offered fewer distractions from peers, less bullying situations, and better grades, repairing the student's self-esteem and building confidence and competence in the student's ability to succeed. Using the email and telephone communication system, the teacher focused attention on just one student at a time which gave students a feeling that they were the center of attention even if the email or telephone call came the next day. In their own environments, the student-participants felt safe, free from distractions, and they could move through the curriculum at their own pace, not the teacher's pace. Spending the time on course content each student needed, enabled them to master the material.

In contrast, others needed the structure of the classroom. They liked the physical presence of the teacher which these participants believed offered immediate feedback. The classroom setting offered them the structure they needed to stay focused. They found fewer distractions with the teacher present than being alone in the online environment.

Asynchronous online learning may not be the correct environment for all students. However, these participants had no other choices to continue their education. Part of the orientation and screening process of all students may include a discussion about how to stay focused on school work when the structure of the classroom is not available. Helping the student-participants understand there may be a perceived lack of immediate feedback and a process for staying focused, may be success factors for these participants.

Administrators' and teachers' perspectives of online learning compared to traditional high school.

Learning readiness. Within the perceptions and realities of online learning, I have identified the fact that participants did not know what they were getting into when they enrolled in an asynchronous online course. A teacher found this fact to be true and that the

students were not ready for online learning. “Most of them were not ready.” Another teacher found deficits in the students’ cognitive, social, and technology abilities. Two students identified writing as one of the skills that was very low and inhibited learning. The students wrote formal, academic papers and communiqués in the language of a text message or postings on a social media site. “I saw online their skills were very low, because their writing and even just their communications, their emails to me were” very informal.

“There’s was like text message and other garbage like that.” One of the teachers urged them to “use good grammar, good sentence, structure, good punctuation, at the very least,” when communicating with her. The teacher realized the deficits stemmed from the students leaving high school early, or they probably did not understand the concepts or writing skills “when they were students in school, and they still did not get it.” When I asked one teacher about online readiness skills in the students the teacher stated, “Most students, on the whole, that I worked with, they didn’t have online readiness skills.” In an earlier discussion, another teacher shared her example of inappropriate email addresses. The teacher’s theory was that students were never taught online readiness skills, career or life skills in high school before they dropped out.

One of the administrators talked about digital natives and digital immigrants when addressing online readiness. Digital natives, which were defined as under 30 years old, in the administrator’s view were “ready,” states,

All we have to work on with them are the things that we’d work on with any student in any course, building up those academic and writing skills, writing skills for sure. They’ve got to develop those, and they’ve got to change those habits from the social media type of verbiage to an academic formal register.

When talking about the older than 30 year old students, the digital immigrants, the teacher believed that “there’s a whole learning curve there, helping them see that bigger picture of what the entire learning management system is trying to do for them.” While in high school these students many not have been introduced to learning as a community in collaboration with one another, which is a goal for the GNM program. “But the digital natives, they just do that because they’re always communicating and collaborating naturally.”

One administrator focused on specific skills such as reading and writing and hesitated to give a particular reading or writing level to be ready for online learning. However, the administrator believed “they do have to be able to read I’d say at a fourth grade level or better. Writing will evolve.” Is it no wonder that some students had difficulty reading texts, especially those with diagnosed reading deficiencies? It makes sense to hear student-participants interviewing with me state that they had a difficult time reading *Beowulf* and *The Scarlet Letter*. The administrator continued by saying that students in GNM also needed to learn the “skill of recognizing” when they did not know something and learn the skills of research to find the answer. “It’s how do I know what I know, and how do I recognize when I need to go find what I don’t know.”

Table 10 summarizes the advantages the online experience afforded the student-participants as compared to their high school experiences. Only a few student-participants believed their traditional high school experiences was preferential to their online experience.

Table 10. Summary: Advantage of online experience versus traditional high school experience

<p>Online education easier and better: Student-participants found online courses easier than in the traditional classroom and a better way of learning for them. The convenience of online education made attending a class easier.</p>	<p>“I could do it on my own time and stuff, and it’s just so much better.” Alicia</p> <p>“Online courses you can take them whenever you want in the day or the night or whatever time.” Juan</p> <p>“Honestly to tell you the truth, for me it’s a lot easier. It is so much easier’ I think that if I had to go back to school or had to be back in a classroom setting, it would be so much harder for me.” Tommy</p>
<p>Better grades: Some student-participants found their grades improved with online education.</p>	<p>“The grades that I got—I was surprised on the grades I actually got, because if I was in high school I’d be getting Cs and Ds and Fs, and I was getting As and Bs.” Brianna</p> <p>“I’m looking at my transcript. When I first got it, I had a 1.6, and I ended up with a 2.1...My lowest class, I think, was a 90 and I might be even downplaying it, but, you know, I received all As.” Mike</p>
<p>Students felt safe studying at home: Because a number of the student-participants were teased and bullied in traditional high school, they found studying at home to be a safe learning environment. Those with diagnosed learning differences did not receive the attention from teachers needed to be successful. The GNM program eliminated many of the student-participants problems in traditional school.</p>	<p>“At least when you’re at home working on a computer, you don’t have peer pressure or anything like that.” Sally</p> <p>“I hated going down the freshmen hallway just 'cause kids are rude and like if you bump into them, they’ll like want to start a fight or something...they have like street credit or something.” Kelly</p> <p>“I just went to see my friends--that was it. Like I tried my work, I tried in the beginning, but it was too hard. The teachers were bad and the kids were picking on me and it was just bad. So I just gave up. And then this program came and it was like, I don’t have to deal with any problems, I could just do my work and that’s it.” Brianna</p>

Table 10 Continued

<p>Uninterrupted teacher attention and learning environment: In the GNM program student-participants were afforded undivided attention by teachers due to the tutoring structure online, that is, by email, telephone, or on the Blackboard desktop. The online program provided an uninterrupted learning environment at home in contrast to a number of students in the classroom either vying for the teachers' attention or disturbing the class with their behavior or comments.</p>	<p>Because in the classroom the students would be yelling and they wouldn't listen to the teacher explain. And, the teacher would have to shout over the students to try and give all the instructions. But while explaining, they end up turning their focus on the students that's interrupting the class. And then it makes you lose your focus on what they're trying to teach you." Sandy</p>
<p>Self-esteem and self-confidence: The successes many student-participants experienced, such as higher grades and course completion, raised their self-esteem and self-confidence.</p>	<p>"I would have to say the online experience was better in a lot of ways just because I didn't have the constant distractions. In high school you have nothing but friends there...I was friends with everyone. I knew almost everyone in the school, that we were all friends, very friendly. Everyone knew who I was, but it was a constant battle because I had to keep up and do that, as opposed to when I was on the computer, I could just do my school work." John</p>
<p>Pacing and mastery learning: Because the student-participants had input into the pacing guides they were able to move forward more quickly than a traditional high school class and spend more time on the content they needed to master. The intense and immediate tutoring provided by the teachers aided students in mastering their lessons.</p>	<p>"[GNM] really opened the door for me. It showed me that I could do it—I mean honestly, I had all As...It showed me that I could do. It prepped me and got me ready for [community college]." Mike</p> <p>"Like if I didn't understand it, I could go back and reread it, and then I would understand it. I didn't end up having to sit in the classroom listening to the teacher try and explain it and get confused with the other students. 'Cause that's how it was for me in high school." Sandy</p> <p>"With Graduate new Mexico, I am able to go at my own pace and I have a little bit more one on one with the teacher who helped me if I need it. All I have to do is ask. And my teacher have been really helpful" Tommy</p> <p>"The self-pacing guide kept me motivated." Lilly</p>

Table 10 Continued

<p>Immediacy of feedback: Quick feedback to student-participants reinforced learning and moved students forward in their lessons.</p>	<p>“Exchanging e-mails and stuff went a lot quicker and smoother than what I would have imagined it to be...They got back with me very quickly on explaining it a little better and that sort of thing.” Sally</p> <p>“Any time I had a question, they would respond immediately which was amazing.” Tommy</p>
<p>Learning disabilities: Student-participants with diagnosed learning disabilities were able to maneuver through the content without distraction, at their own pace.</p>	<p>“A teacher had me tested for SSS which is Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome...I have my filters and my glasses, and I can read better and I can see better the words on the page and I can study at my own pace.” Tommy</p> <p>“I am dyslexic, I have ADD...[Being dyslexic and ADD] didn’t impact me at all.” Lilly</p>

Summary. The majority of student-participants favored their online experience in the GNM classes over their traditional high school experience. They liked the convenience online education gave them, the curriculum was challenging, they felt safe, they were relieved of distractions, teasing and bullying, they kept their own pace in each class, and they found individual and undivided attention from her teachers.

A few students preferred the traditional high school classroom as compared to online. They believed they received more immediate feedback from teachers and there were fewer distractions with the teacher present and greater focus in the classroom.

The teachers’ and administrators’ views were from a different perspective than the students. The teacher and administrators saw low skills in their students which they attributed to the students leaving school early. Writing and communication skills were particularly low. They saw a difference in students over 30 years old and under 30 years old

overall. The over 30 year old students had a greater learning curve than the under 30s possibly because computer technology had not been introduced into the schools when they were students.

Research Question 3.3: What are the Challenges and Barriers to Course Completion?

Challenges and barriers. Participants mentioned a number of challenges and barriers that hindered their progress or interfered with course completion. Some of the challenges and barriers were personal in nature while others were academic or hardware/software related. In some cases, the participants experienced more than one challenge or barrier.

Mike's girlfriend was in a depression because she had lost both her mother and her aunt in a short period of time. Spending time with his girlfriend caused Mike to be "kinda sidelined" with his time. In addition, he was looking for a job because bills had to be paid. Academically, Mike found the discussion boards were a challenge for him. Because the class was asynchronous and the start and end time for each student was individualized, it was difficult for him to find a student at his particular place in the course to discuss with. After Mike posted, he had to wait "a week or two for someone to respond to my stuff" slowing down his academic progress.

Anna and Tommy faced the challenges of work and attending to their classes at the same time. Anna was not able to do both and eventually dropped the GNM courses. She did not feel confident enough to attempt to work and take classes. "Oh, I don't think I could do it." Tommy, on the other hand, was juggling work and his online classes. He works with his uncle cleaning yards, and when it was hot his energy is drained. However, he managed to fit in his studies. "It's been difficult trying to manage my classes with my work...Me having to

go out and work all day long in the hot sun and have to come home and sit down on the computer. But, I forced myself to do it because it is something that I need to do.”

For Sally, Rebecca, and Brianna getting back into the swing of school was a challenge. Sally and Rebecca had been out of school for 10 years or more. Sally’s biggest obstacle was just getting back into the hang of it all. “It’s been ten years since I’ve been in school, so getting back into the whole mindset of studying and reading, just getting back into the whole motion...I’ve stepped outside of proper English and grammar, and it was helping me get back into the hang of all that and teaching me how to research resources.” Rebecca’s obstacle was doing homework. “Most of the obstacles were just being back in getting this schedule down and actually doing your work and turning it in. The whole school thing.” Brianna had only been out of high school a few years but had to re-learn or step back before continuing. “Relearning everything. Like, I had to take pre-algebra before I had to get to algebra. And then I had to refresh my memory on things...school hasn’t been school for four years and I needed refreshment.”

For Maria and Antonio just “doing it” was the obstacle. Motivation was difficult for them. Maria said that “pushing myself to get on to it” was her obstacle. Antonio had difficulty with the long distance communication with the teacher by email and telephone. “I just call them, or I try to figure out myself, but then I get frustrated and just log out, you know. It’s frustrating and difficult. It gives me a headache.” Antonio may have had some reading difficulties as well as motivational issues although he says he can

read perfect. “Understanding the instructions, yeah, what to do, how to work the program because you know, and I hate myself for it is difficult...but it’s just hard for me to concentrate and understand step by step what to do, to have someone show me.

He believed the answer to his challenges was more intervention by the teacher. “To talk to me more. To make me understand more, but then it comes to me being motivated to doing it.” Lilly said the hardest thing about going back to school was “staying motivated, because it’s an online class. There would be days where I just didn’t want to do anything at all with the class work but I knew that I had to and it was just very hard to stay motivated.”

Juan was another participant who found his challenge in multiple areas. “The hardest thing right now is reading. Like reading a lot, like it frustrates me, like it’s a lot.” When I asked him why he thought reading was so difficult for him, he responded, “Because I don’t like to read that much. When I see the content like it’s a lot of reading it kind of frustrates me 'cause I think I’ll never finish.” Juan explained that sometimes he became distracted while on the computer, and “It’s like your mind goes off and you want to do something else on the internet.” To compound his challenges, Juan was working and taking care of his little sister while his mom went to work. “When my mom had to work in the afternoons, and I couldn’t do anything because I had to take care of my sister.”

Recalling Adrian’s frustrations around the curriculum, he did not like to “conversate” with his peers, and he had trouble opening the pages on the website. In regards to “conversating” with peers, Adrian was quite vocal.

I thought it was just kind of dumb. I was like, ‘I just want to get my schoolwork done. I don’t want to talk to anybody. I just want to do what I want to do or like, what I need to do and then just get done. I don’t really feel like I need to score points by talking to other people...Wow, this is pointless.’”

The timeline of 18 weeks to complete a class did not work for Adrian. He also found frustration and challenges in the fact that the links on the website would not open. He did not have time to go to the computer lab for help. While his wife was at work, he was responsible

for the care of his child. She was “screaming” for his attention. An obstacle to his success in the GNM program was the lack of support he needed for childcare for his daughter, so that he could focus when studying.

A minority of the GNM participants did not have a computer. Verna did not have a computer and could not get to the high school to use the computers there. She used a “former” friend’s computer’ but “I forgot my pass code.” She received emails from the teacher telling her that if she did not start working, she would be dropped from the class. “Stuff gets in your way, for me it’s all the time, so that’s what happened, and it’s just too hard for me to come by a computer when I didn’t have one.” Mary had a computer some of the time. When I interviewed her, she said, “Right now it’s just I don’t have a computer.” So, she was not able to continue her studies. Maria did not have a printer. She faced her challenge by typing her paper and “then just save them onto like a memory card, and then I’d have to go print them somewhere else.”

Brianna shared a computer with her sister but did not live at the same house as her sister, “so that was the hard part.” In a similar fashion, Kelly lived at her mother’s home but had to go to her father’s home to access the computer. Kelly’s other challenge was not having a clear explanation on how to access the information on the class website. “When I first started out, I couldn’t figure out how to get the documents and read them and how to open assignments and everything. So, it was a really slow start for me.”

The teachers expected their students to spend a minimum of five hours per day logged in to their class work. That presented challenges for a number of participants. In Patience’s case, technical problems prevented her from spending her time on the computer in another way. When sending emails via the Blackboard system to her instructor, Patience received

error messages many times. When Patience used her personal email she received the same error messages. She found this technical issue to be time consuming.

My computer would always send me an error message saying that it didn't go through, so half the time I didn't even know if my emails went through. And, then I started sending from my regular email account, and then I would still get these weird messages back...and then it says that you would get a response within 24 hours...That was real time-consuming, 'cause then you had to wait till the next day, you know, to get the response back...because you're trying to put in your five hours a day, but how are you gonna put in your five hours if you don't know what you're doing.

The time element impacted Patience's study in her class with an added time component.

When her deadline to complete the course was approaching, Patience had a difficult time finishing assignments and completing and understanding the reading according to her pacing guide. She was at odds with the concept of the pacing guide. The fact that "If they're telling you to work at your own pace, and they're giving you a timeline" seemed contradictory to her. She seemed confused about finding the book she needed and finally checked it out of the library. Patience made the attempt to complete her reading, but she had fallen behind and ultimately failed the class. Patience's third obstacle was caring for her children. She found studying difficult while she was "just kind of me doing my paper at the same time, I mean, I wanna play, I wanna play. They wanna hang out with you."

An extension of Patience's situation was Sahi's dilemma to find time to study.

"Setting apart time for myself to do it. 'Cause if I don't do that then you know how that goes. Everyday life is going to take over. If you don't push yourself, no one else is going to push you to do it, and you're going to have to do it on your own." Christie found the biggest obstacle to completing her class was "discipline, self-discipline." She ultimately failed her class because "I just couldn't find the time to get it in in that short amount of time." She was

reading *The Scarlet Letter* and “was having a really hard time reading, comprehending, and doing my work in such a short period of time...Just trying to find time, you know, to make sure that I got it all done...”

Obstacles and challenges for the student-participants in the GNM program were varied and shared by a number of them. Personal issues with family and friends interfered with course progress. Child care was mentioned as an obstacle and a challenge. Technical problems with email and lack of hardware such as computers and printers impeded academic progress. For some, being out of school for a period of time and getting back into the swing and mindset of school, such as studying and doing homework, presented an obstacle they had to overcome to be successful.

Academic problems that were mentioned a number of times were difficulty reading the material and difficulty comprehending the readings. Peer review was mentioned as a difficulty due to the staggered beginning dates and pace of the individual students. Peer tutoring was a technique used in traditional classrooms and in synchronous online learning environments because all students were at the same point in their course progress. In an asynchronous learning environment, peer tutoring did not appear to work smoothly because students were not connected academically or socially through the class. Their learning was paced differently from one another. The pacing difference resulted in students unfamiliar with one another and at different points within the curriculum. For peer tutoring to work in an asynchronous learning environment, a common meeting time online for all students could be established to form some sense of social community. This community forum may help students to respond better to requests for peer review.

Ultimately, motivation and time management for many of the participants presented a challenge for them. In some cases the participant failed a class because of multiple challenges -- many may have been corrected by strong time management skills. These challenges and obstacles could be turned into success factors with participants being screened for placement as they entered the program, and a mandatory orientation program with a strong time management component.

Administrators' and teachers' perspectives of challenges and barriers to course completion.

Lack of skills. Some of the challenges and barriers participants experienced were shared by the teachers. The GNM program goal was established to bring back 10,000 students into the educational system, albeit a new arm of education in New Mexico, and gave them the opportunity to earn a high school diploma. They observed students who were motivated to complete their studies but a large number of students dropped out shortly after enrollment.

Study skills, motivation to complete a course, time management, and following directions were challenges for many students. One teacher found a pattern in the students, which led to successfully completing courses. The teacher found that if a student completed an assignment and/or corrected an assignment and re-submitted it, that student was likely to complete a course successfully. The teacher found the students, to be on one end of the success spectrum or the other. Middle ground did not exist. "The students that weren't successful were really not successful. I mean we're talking like they had a zero percent or teen percent in the class...there was no middle ground with the students that I had." Each course had an 18 week time limit. This same teacher would not drop the student until the

very end. The teacher entered “zeroes for all the assignments that they didn’t complete, and I waited to do it until the end.” This gave the student an opportunity to complete the entire course at the last minute and salvage a grade. The teacher attributed most failures due to lack of attendance. Even though there was not an attendance grade, it was strongly suggested that each student login each day. The challenge for the teacher was to find the students who were online ready and motivated to be self-directed learners. “It’s self directed learning, and you have to have at very least a motivation to do it to login.”

Another teacher found similar challenges with students who completed courses and those who did not complete courses. The teacher observed that many students thought they could get a class over in a short period of time without much effort and earn their diploma. However, it did not turn out that way. “We lost a lot of 'em just because of that.” In contrast to an administrators, the teacher stated, the “Our success rate was very low. If you look at some of our grading, a lot of 'em got in there one or two times, said, ‘This is too hard,’ and they never came back, never showed up. They didn’t want to work at it; they just wanted it to be given to them.” This may be a reflection of students not understanding the expectations of the courses, a lack of readiness and self-discipline, and a lack of motivation and study skills on the students’ part.

Attitude. Teachers were the main support of the students and the students identified their communication with them as a major success factor in the GNM program. Teachers’ support included a message by email, mail, or telephone to prompt students to keep up with their work. The challenge for the teacher was the attitude displayed by some students when they sent messages, saying they had not seen them online in a while. One administrator shared that the teachers are trained to send messages to students they have not heard from

after three days. It is a reminder to the student that the teacher was supporting them and they were expected to finish the course. “I’m not saying that removes the barrier or the obstacles, but sometimes just having them know that somebody is out there and they’re not just a number or that name on the screen.” While “some students will be motivated to check in others become a little bit grumpy, and they say, please stop bugging me. I’m busy. I’ll get to this when I’m ready.” In the end, the relationship between the student and the teacher may in essence be a challenge and obstacle in and of itself. From this administrator’s perspective, “It’s just really important that they feel like we’re paying attention to them.”

One of the other teachers found when in conversation with some of her students, students became defensive when she referenced improvement in academic and social skills. “Their frame of reference with academic and kind of social skills...there was a lot of resentment—defenses were raised.” Students had a chip on their shoulder because life has been hard for them and they are defensive about “always having to prove themselves.”

One of the administrators’ had similar experiences with students. It was the mixture of adolescence and adulthood coming together to create an attitude of you-can’t-tell-me-what-to-do because you’re not my mom who will ground me or the principal who will “kick me out of school.” These students developed a lifestyle, which may be self-defeating, but were not ready to make changes in some areas to better themselves. The administrator found many times an attitude of “don’t nag me, don’t tell me what to do. I’m an adult.” The administrator says, “They weren’t as malleable as teenagers can be.”

Turning obstacles into success factors. Many of the challenges and barriers the teachers and administrators observed in the GNM program were located at the administrative

level. These were obstacles that could be success factors, and a benefit to students, if time is taken to improve the infrastructure of GNM.

Program accountability and online readiness. One of the teachers was the most outspoken about the infrastructure and accountability of the GNM program. When I asked this teacher about the strengths of the GNM program, the response was, “From my perspective, there weren’t.”

I think from start to finish it as a disaster, truly. I think it was poorly planned out, I think it was poorly executed, I mean I know it’s awful to say that, but being in the trenches with it and seeing mismanagement of millions of dollars and that program. I could have been very successful had the right protocols been put into place and the right steps for those students and other things like that.

Because the program goal was to bring back 10,000 dropout students, the teacher was of the opinion that

we just kind of opened the flood gates and let anybody in there. But, I guess that it was just ill conceived, ill planned and ill carried out I think. It doesn’t sit well with me to be part of a failing program. It doesn’t sit well with a professional educator to have such high numbers of students who are not being successful.

Another teacher talked about the fact that students were enrolled in the program without knowing anything about them. The teacher’s impression was that when site coordinators enrolled students in GNM, their duty was done. They had no additional obligation to the students. The teachers came up with a questionnaire for site coordinators to use when interviewing a student for the GNM program. “We do need to make sure what their motivation is; what are their skills, how much time do they have; do they have Internet access, daily, not just once a week.” In addition, it was important to review the student’s transcript to determine how many credits the student had and how many credits the student

needed. The teacher's perspective was that the program worked best for students who were in their junior year or

almost done with their junior year. You needed a few credits or junior, and then their senior...The most successful ones were gonna be the one that were seniors and needed one or two credits to graduate. Those were the one that you could've really helped, but we were getting kids that dropped out in their freshman year. They needed a whole high school course.

When I asked one of the administrators about the number of credits a student needed to make up as compared to earning a diploma, she was definite that the fewer credits a student needed to make up the more likely the student was to complete courses and requirements for a diploma. "We had higher percentages of completions among students who had less credits to graduate, and that was really the focus of Graduate New Mexico, was students who were really close to finishing."

Training for site coordinators would benefit students so that they were not set up to fail classes or drop out again. Connecting some of the anecdotal data from participants I interviewed and an observation from one of the teachers is the site coordinators would enroll students and sign them up for six to eight classes. Because many students did not understand asynchronous online education and were not aware of the expectations of each class, "the kids would get in there and say, 'Well, this is hard. This is like going to school. I gotta what? I gotta go every day? Why? Why do I have to do that?'" Knowing that a dropout usually had other adult responsibilities, how were these students expected to complete six to eight classes? The irony of this enrollment structure and lack of training for site coordinators in enrollment and understanding the dropout student was that the students would drop out again. One teacher underscores this irony as he described the situation. "Here we have a dropout recovery program that had a lot of dropouts."

Two teachers suggested a first step to improving the program for students was developing a mini-diagnostic evaluation for students to determine their level or readiness, motivation and skills levels. This was not to be used to tell students “you can’t come in the program” because that was not the goal of the program. Managing the GNM program with visionary program leadership was needed to get personnel in place to run the program. Knowing where the students were when they enter the program would help them get to where they really wanted to be. “If we wanna really look at this population, we need to understand as program leaders—some of 'em have high educational goals. Some of 'em, they wanna go to college. It’s not just high school.”

One of the teachers had similar beliefs as the other teacher. The teacher was skeptical about screening students and the possibility of turning students away based on lack of readiness. The teacher felt strongly about not denying a student education if they wanted it. I asked her how a correction could be made so that students would be on a level playing field of readiness when they entered the GNM classes.

They probably could have offered some trainings or maybe a mandatory day of classes seated in a lab environment or a face-to-face environment that you could have said, ‘Okay, these are the skills that you have to have; and, if you don’t have them then you have to come and to take our one day Saturday course or two day evening course; and. Come and sit so we can talk about this kind of stuff. So, I think the front end stuff of it was not handled very well.

The teachers were in favor of weekly reports from site coordinators to let the three GNM teachers know how their students were doing. This would hold site coordinators accountable. “What did the site coordinators do to facilitate the student’s success, what did they do during the week? Did they check in with them? Did they call them? Did they help them with the lesson?”

For site coordinators to be accountable, superintendents must buy into the GNM program. Currently, superintendents put the GNM students and program aside. When students were enrolled in GNM under their schools, the superintendents received Student Equalization Guarantee (SEG) monies the next year. This was accepted with the feeling that the schools did not have to do anything with the GNM students. However, superintendents did not like the idea that the GNM students were enrolled under their schools and would drop out of the GNM program because dropping out affected their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and graduation rates. The confusion as to who the student belongs to must be resolved.

Student accountability. If the teachers could restructure the GNM program, they would not have it totally asynchronous. Each of the teachers told stories of students using excuses for not showing up to class, that is, logging in. In the asynchronous environment it was too easy to avoid class work because there was no face-to-face interaction, as teenagers would have in a traditional setting. Someone in the family was sick, work got in the way, child care was not available, the Internet was not accessible, the computer broke were excuses each teacher heard. The teacher would use a blended approach to keep students accountable for their work. “I would want that face-to-face interaction and some more accountability and all those things that they don’t necessarily enjoy, but if they haven’t logged in during a day, I need to know why.” As was shared in the participant interviews, transportation was an issue for some students. Regional support centers or local high schools in walking distance of the student would be a must for this idea to work.

The same teacher also would define the guidelines for staying in the program. “We’re not going to dork around with this. You’re either going to commit to doing it or you’re not... You have three days where there’s not successful login, three days in a row,

then you're done." Does this reflect an understanding of the dropout student and their adult responsibilities? Will this make the dropout student more accountable? Potentially, a comprehensive interview or mini-diagnostic, as other teachers propose, may help keep students in the program and raise the completion rate by enhancing the understanding of the student for each teacher. However, a questionnaire/diagnostic would be presented without making a dropout with low self-esteem and self-confidence feel worse about their abilities.

One of the administrators was cautionary when discussing a questionnaire or diagnostic measure of student success. The administrator witnessed an interview in which a dropout student was interviewed by a program teacher. The way the information was presented "he's just sinking lower and lower and lower and thinking. I could just see his self-confidence just [drop] and it just really impacted me." Ultimately, he was pushed out of the program before he started.

Seeking quality teachers. Four of the five GNM teachers and administrators had previous experience with at-risk and dropout students in their educational careers and in their families. One teacher did not. One seasoned dropout teacher feels strongly that teachers of a drop out population must understand the characteristics of the drop out student. Because a teacher does not have experience with a drop out population does not necessarily mean the teacher cannot learn about this target group and act accordingly for their benefit. However, one teacher, who had never worked with dropout students prior to coming to IDEAL-NM, voiced frustration with dropout students in her comments. This teacher believed students used their dropout reason as an excuse for not doing class work. After a while the teacher became discouraged with the students. The teacher described the situation as "I don't care. I don't care what your excuse is. I really do not care anymore. Suck it up and do it or don't."

The teacher realized she became “the nastiest woman on the planet to them,” but [the teacher] grew weary of hearing the same story “500” times and lost sympathy for the students. The student-participant interviews revealed students did not have a positive and strong rapport with this teacher.

Another teacher came from an educational history of teaching at-risk and dropout students. The teacher’s point was for program support and success of the students. “You have to have people who understand this population and are willing to work with them because it’s not the traditional classroom, and it’s not, ‘Oh, well, you have to suck it up. This is school. This is your second shot.’” For this teacher, creating a program like GNM required not only good teachers but “a great instructor who understands what they’re walking into.” Otherwise, no one benefits.

The teacher struggled with the lack of outreach communication with the students. The teacher’s concern was messaging to students. Even though tutoring and class announcements were posted online, there were those students who were not digitally connected because they did not log in, or they lost computer connection or phone service, and were missing the messages. The teacher believed that outreach needed to come to the student in different forms, such as old fashioned mail.

This teacher continued to advocate for “holistic” support from start to finish. Just having a program for dropout students was not enough. All the umbrella support services must be in place for a student to be successful. Because New Mexico was a rural and poor state, “access to broadband [and] access to a computer lab” are essential support mechanisms for program and student success. The teacher also mentioned technology support was lacking. “With online learning, there’s no 24/7 support here. It’s more of a program support

not just put on by the instructor to teach these things, but actually a program point where there's alternative resources or how-to-tutorials.”

Table 11 outlines the similarities student-participants and teachers and administrators share as challenges and barriers to online education. The challenges and barriers listed in Table 11 could also be considered factors related to success for students in online coursework if some changes to the GNM program could be made.

Table 11. Summary: Challenges and barriers to success

<p>Getting into the swing of school again: Because most of the student-participants had been out of school for numbers of years, several student-participants responded by saying that just getting into school mode was one of their challenges. Making time in the day to do school work, finding time and quiet to read, and meeting deadlines for homework were some of their challenges.</p>	<p>“It’s been ten years since I’ve been in school, so getting back into the whole mindset of studying and reading, just getting back into the whole motion...I’ve stepped outside of proper English and grammar, and it was helping me get back into the hang of all that...” Sally</p> <p>“Most of the obstacles were just being back in getting this schedule down and actually doing your work and turning it in. The whole school thing.” Rebecca</p> <p>Relearning everything. Like, I had to take pre-algebra before I had to get to algebra. And then I had to refresh my memory on things...school hasn’t been school for four years and I needed refreshment.” Brianna</p>
<p>Participating in the online community: A number of the student-participants voiced a concern over trying to be part of an online community. They found it difficult in an asynchronous format where everyone was at a different place in the curriculum to get peer assignments completed in a timely fashion. Many of the student-participants only wanted to “get it done.”</p>	<p>“The discussion boards were definitely difficult because, you, know, everyone’s in their different areas of the actual course. The expectations that were set were that we have to have X amount within a certain week. The teacher should try to help us out...because there was times that I was waiting like a week or two for someone to respond to my stuff.” Mike.</p> <p>“They weren’t really interested in communicating with other people. They just wanted to get it done.” Teacher</p>

Table 11 Continued

Lack of computer, skills, connectivity:

Student-participants faced a number of technological challenges. Some did not have a personal computer and had to find other sources to use a computer such as the local library or local high school. Others lacked technology skills. Still others lost and/or could not financially afford Internet service.

“The older the student was, the more trouble they had usually [with technology]. Teacher

“...A place where they can go to have access to the technology, because it’s a poverty issue.

They don’t have the money to get their Internet. Several students that, as we were working with them, ‘Well my Internet got shut off, so I couldn’t come to class.’ You try to tell ‘em, ‘Well, there’s other places to go. They’re just not aware.’” Teacher

“Sometimes stuff gets in your way. For me it’s all the time, so that’s what happened and it’s just too hard for me to come by a computer when I didn’t have one...I didn’t have a computer. [The counselor] just told me I could go to the high school and use one of their computers. I just wasn’t able to get there.” Verna

“When I first started out, I couldn’t figure out how to get the documents and read them and how to open assignments and everything. So, it was a really slow start for me.” Brianna

“I think that number one in this state, being that we have such rural areas, access to broadband, access to a computer lab...we have a very rural and very poor state.”
Teacher

Reading difficulties: A few of the student-participants revealed they had diagnosed learning difficulties, especially in the area of reading and reading comprehension. The asynchronous nature of the online program allowed them to re-read and take time to comprehend reading material lessening the impact of learning disabilities.

“The hardest thing right now is reading. Like reading a lot, like it frustrates me, like it’s a lot...Because I don’t like to read that much. When I see the content like it’s a lot of reading it kind of frustrates me ‘cause I think I’ll never finish.” Juan

Table 11 Continued

<p>Poor writing and communication skills: The teachers identified writing and communication skills as very low. Many of the student-participants lost or never had academic writing skills which inhibited their progress in the GNM program until they came up to par.</p>	<p>“Plagiarism was a huge one for us that we were constantly bucking against—plagiarism and what constitutes plagiarism...” Teacher</p> <p>“They were using text language to write to, to correspond to us and to write their papers. They didn’t know how to spell, so they were using text language in their papers.” Teacher</p>
<p>Lack of study skills: Time management, organization, and self-discipline were skills most of the student-participants experienced as deficits. Teachers spent time teaching these skills while teaching content. Student-participants also had a difficult time following directions.</p>	<p>“We had to instruct them in those life skill kind of things; the time management and planning.” Teacher</p> <p>“If one small little thing went wrong, let’s say they didn’t have a baby sitter one day and they couldn’t get online or the system went down one day, and they tried to login and the couldn’t for one. One tiny little thing would set them on a course of destruction. It’s like they don’t have that skill of resiliency...” Teachers</p> <p>“I just couldn’t find the time to get it in, in that short amount of time...[I] was having a really hard time reading, comprehending, and doing my work in such a short period of time...Just trying to find time, you know, to make sure that I got it all done...” Christie</p>
<p>Personal issues: Personal issues of illness, caring for a parent or helping the family were challenges for the student-participants to complete course work.</p>	<p>“Relationships—that made it difficult...My girlfriend...She lost her mom, you know, eventually she lost her aunt...There were kind of, you know, these issues for a long period of time, off and on. You know, that’s kina sidelined my time.” Mike</p> <p>“Just that fact that I couldn’t leave my mother long enough, and the fact that I absolutely had to have a job being that is was just me and her, and one of us had to make money for bills...I just didn’t have the time that I would need to finish the course as well as a job” Anna</p> <p>“When my mom had to work in the afternoons, and I couldn’t do anything because I had to take care of my sister.” Juan</p>

Table 11 Continued

Work schedules: A few of the lucky student-participants had jobs. They found their challenge in having to get coursework done around their work schedule.

“It’s been difficult trying to manage my classes with my work... Working around my schedule has been hard for me because we have to survive... I think it is basically my work; me having to go out and work all day long in the hot sun and have to come home and sit down on the computer.” Tommy

Unrealistic course expectations and learner readiness: Student-participants were not well informed regarding the expectations of taking an online course. Their desire for a diploma drove them into the GNM program but many did not complete one course because they did not understand that they would have to do the actual class work to earn the high school diploma.

“Cause I thought I could take my time and do my classes... It was just too complicated... 'Cause it said that I had to like “conversate” with my peers or whatever, and I had to look stuff up, and my computer wouldn’t open pages that it’s telling me to open, and I was just like, ‘Wow, this is stupid,’ So I pretty much just quit that.” Adrian

“They were in the mindset that, well this program’s just gonna give me my high school diploma. They didn’t realize that they had to go to school, they had to turn in assignments, they had to do work, they had to work at an education—it wasn’t just gonna be given to them” Teacher

Undeveloped program infrastructure: The teachers and administrators of the GNM program were aware that there were program infrastructure flaws. However, they would have liked time to amend and modify internal structural problems because they believed in the program.

“I think from start to finish it was a disaster, truly. I think it was poorly planned out, I think it was poorly executed, I mean I know it’s awful to say that, but being in the trenches with it and seeing mismanagement of millions of dollars... It could have been very successful had the right protocols been put into place and the right steps for those students and other things like that.” Teacher

“We just kind of opened the flood gates and let anybody in there. I guess that it (GNM) was just ill conceived, ill planned and ill carried out I think...” Teacher

Table 11 Continued

	<p>“The most successful ones were gonna be the ones that were seniors and needed on or two credits to graduate. Those were the ones that you could’ve really helped, but we were getting kids that dropped out in their freshman year.” Teacher</p>
	<p>“The weakness was the interview process and signing up students that—instead of just signing up everyone, sign up the ones who have a chance at being successful” Teacher</p>
	<p>“And the way the Graduate New Mexico program was structured is we were supposed to have hubs across the state, so we had people that could work with the kids that were in the region to support the and in some areas they did that really well, and some areas they didn’t.” Administrator</p>
<p>Curriculum flaws: The curriculum was imported from another program. The GNM teachers did not develop their own course work. They could enhance the course work to meet the needs of the students; however, they found many flaws in the materials they were using.</p>	<p>“I just found some of the information to be, you know, typos, and in definitions they were definitely misspelled words...it was hard to follow.” Mike</p> <p>“The courses were already made, but part of my job here was also to enhance courses and make them better...We found a lot of flaws in how they were developed.” Teacher</p>
<p>Need for quality teachers: It was clear that teachers in a program like GNM must be familiar with the culture and life of a dropout student. Patience and people skills as well as content knowledge are requirements of the teacher and necessary for a dropout student to be successful in online course work.</p>	<p>“Some teachers weren’t as helpful as others. Like if I had to ask a question, some were not as clear or as willing to get nitty-gritty and figure out what I was trying to say.” Anna</p> <p>“You have to have people who understand this population and are willing to work with them because it’s not the traditional classroom and it’s not ‘Oh, well, you have to suck it up. This is school. This is your second shot.’...a great instructor who understands what they’re walking into.” Teacher</p>

Summary. Challenges and barriers to online learning as reported by student-participants included personal issues of illness in self or family members. For those who were out of school for a while, getting back into the swing of school, managing work schedules, study schedules, and finding the motivation to “do” school was difficult. Participating in an online community and talking with others was an obstacle in design for many. Others had hardware problems, forgot passwords, or had Internet connectivity problems. Child care issues interfered with study time for some.

The teachers and administrators found some common and unique challenges and barriers to online learning in this population as a common lack of readiness and study skills. Some student needed to find motivation and hone study skills such as time management. A number of students were challenged with diagnosed reading difficulties and low reading comprehension. Because the student-participants were adults, some approached their course work with poor attitudes and defensiveness.

One of the teachers felt the program was badly constructed and needed work on the program infrastructure and accountability to students. The program needed an identity overhaul. Site coordinators required more training and superintendents needed to be brought on board to reduce challenges and barriers for students in rural areas including Internet connectivity. Better screening for students would eliminate the challenges many students faced by preparing them for online learning. Foremost, quality teachers must be sought who understand the dropout student to reduce some of the challenges and barriers this special population encounters.

Additional Information

The goal of this research was to answer the research questions. However, along the way additional information emerged from the interview data that were unexpected and should be recognized.

Arrested development. It was an interesting finding to hear the GNM instructors talk about their students as adults with teenage minds. Three of the teachers and administrators referred to their students as acting like high school students even though they may be in their 30s or older. They questioned why they had to follow formats for writing, why they could not use certain technologies, why they had to follow instructions when producing assignments. One administrator stated they were not as “malleable” as teens, and there was a sense of stubbornness about them. They acted like teenagers but were in adult bodies with adult responsibilities.

Their skills were those of high school students or less depending on their dropout date. Because they left high school early, they missed many of the lessons of life such as social negotiation with others. While in the GNM program, cooperation and collaboration skills that should have been learned in high school were not evident. They did not want to interact with other students to form any kind of online community. They used writing mechanisms that were appropriate for social media but not for formal academic work. One teacher recalled his students in the beginning.

We also had students that started off, and they were texting. They were using text language to write, to correspond to us and to write their papers. They didn't know how to spell, so they were using text language in their papers. We tried to shut that down right away. I think it frustrated some of 'em 'cause they didn't know how to spell.

High school was prime time for students to discover who they are, define their identity, and struggle with social negotiation with peers and significant others. It was also a time to accumulate knowledge to move into college or enter the military or start a career. Study skills, time management skills, organizational skills, and prioritization were all learned lessons in high school. One teacher remembered teaching these skills to her students.

You have a technique...it is self-paced, but you have to set a pace for this and kind of stick to that. And, if you don't get online today make sure you get online the next couple of days and hit it hard. So, we had to instruct them in those life skill kind of things; the time management and planning.

In the GNM program, were the students able to transfer the skills of using the pacing guide to their everyday life? With that comes increased self-confidence and self-esteem at graduation with their cohort. The comments of the teachers about lack of motivation, lack of prioritization, lack of study skills, and low self-esteem confirm this loss. By leaving high school early, these students appeared to have interrupted the normal developmental processes of adolescents and remained stuck in their brains at this level. As a teacher stated, "Their lobes have become hard." It is admirable to return to school to earn a diploma, but can earning a diploma reverse or repair some of the damage done by dropping out.

Multi-generational clientele: Entitlement and accountability. The participants interviewed in this study range in age from 18 to 47. One teacher talked about two students she had, one who was in his 50s with the youngest being 16. As the teachers worked with these students, it became apparent they had different learning styles, values, and needs. Thirty-ish was the break point the teachers observed when defining the digital natives and the digital immigrants. However, they were also surprised that some of the under 30 students were not as technically savvy as they thought. This is possibly due to the fact that they

dropped out of school and did not learn the formal use of technology in education, such as maneuvering a website, finding learning materials through links, or posting emails and papers in the correct places and in the correct format. It does not seem to make a difference that they all have cell phones and can surf the Internet. One teacher noticed that the older a student was, the more difficulty they had with technology. Rosanne was a good example of having to learn how to use a computer at age 47.

This teacher's experience with her students found the younger students, those in their 20s, to be entitled to an education and question why some tasks were required of them. "The younger ones, the teenagers, and the 20 something's they were really kind of razor sharp with what their sense of entitlement [is]." They would question why they had to follow directions and became upset when a paper was handed back with comments to correct and re-submit. The teacher noticed that with the over 30 students, she did not feel that way. "There's definitely a kind of schism, 30ish and below, that sense of entitlement is just overwhelming, and kind of above is...they see opportunity in, 'Please help me.'" Two teachers shared a student who spent more time writing a paper on why he should not have gotten a B on a paper and deserved an A, than he did writing the paper and correcting it.

Another teacher's thoughts on entitlement came from his experience with students thinking that they were going to be handed a diploma and did not have to work for it. Many of his students became frustrated and did not return to the program once they realized this was really school. "They were in the mindset that this program's just gonna give me my high school diploma."

An administrator found generational differences she termed the digital natives and the digital immigrants. The digital natives were the 30 and below group who are used to

collaboration and getting together on social media to communicate with each other. The digital immigrants, later 20s and older, had a harder time understanding the need for 21st century skills of communication and collaboration and “complain that they don’t understand why they have to do an assignment, *and* they have to go the discussion board, *and* maybe they have to participate in the blog.” Adrian was a good example of balking at having to “conversate” with others online. He saw no benefit from it and did not want to talk others; he only wanted to get his work done. During their past experience of being in school, the later 20s and older students were not instilled with collaboration skills in school and did not have the technology at their disposal to use for communication. In one administrator’s view of multi-generational teaching

They don’t understand how we’re trying to translate the community and collaboration element that you get in a face to face environment into the online environment. But, the digital natives, they just do that because they’re always communicating and collaborating naturally.

The multi-generational issues presented curricular dilemmas for instructional designers who must design curriculum to meet the needs of all online consumers, yet speak to different learning styles and raise all students to new standards of learning. It was interesting to reflect on one administrator’s educational philosophy when she stated that dropouts are marginalized students who have been pushed out of high school that was a one size fits all educational system. It appears the GNM curriculum was also a one size fits all program imported from the IDEAL-NM online high school program. Even though one teacher said that part of his job was to enhance the curriculum for his students, was there enough time given to teachers to differentiate the curriculum to meet students’ needs? Instructional designers and instructors must be fluent in understanding their target online

consumers, in this case as adolescents as well as adult learners from a multi-generational perspective.

Program accountability: Schools failing students. It was apparent from the participant interviews and the administrator and teacher interviews that dropouts had a tough time in high school. Each scenario developed over time, not in a single incident. Student-participants talked about bullying and teasing with no reaction or relief from the school. High absentee rates and discipline issues mounted for some student-participants without intervention from the schools. Pregnant female students felt unwanted by their principals for fear they may be a bad influence on other students. Support for those student-participants with learning disabilities was perceived to be absent for them, and school life became a struggle.

The failure of their high schools left an impact on the participants' lives. They have a lower fund of knowledge as adults than the average teenager. They have developed a defensive posture in life. One teacher believed the students were victims and acted as such, using excuses to not complete class work. She talked about how discouraged she was at hearing the same excuses all the time. "One little thing happened to them, and they kind of implode." Another teacher defined a victim mentality by the excuses he heard. His students were not able to work through bumps in the road; many could attend to only one thing at a time.

It was a lot of family crisis issues: somebody was sick, somebody, was hurt, somebody was incarcerated, and life issues go in their way, and they needed somebody to take care of them, or they had to take care of somebody, and when they're doing that, that's their whole life. Whatever things they were dealing with before or doing otherwise, they just set aside. They don't know how to prioritize; they don't know how to set up time schedules.

The teacher did not think they were victims but believed the students felt that they were not in control of their lives. “It’s really not the victim, so to speak, but kind of, life is controlling me, I’m not controlling life.”

The dropout profile (Table 1), which was supported in many of the interviews, demonstrated that they are poor, jobless, and discouraged. They left school knowing that school was not a good place for them, without regard to the impact of their decision, and developed an attitude and lifestyle of survival. Many are living at Maslow’s lowest level of basic needs.

As they experienced life, they realized they needed a high school diploma. When the GNM program was implemented in August 2010, many of these students flocked to take advantage of an opportunity they had been seeking. The program did not define the student who should be enrolled in the program; there was a lack of sufficient student screening and transcript analysis; Internet was scarce for some; hardware was lacking at times to complete assignments; and there was a reported lack of program organization and support for students and teachers. Ultimately, with a political change in the state’s highest office, the funding was discontinued. The program funding was originally set for two years, but by the time the program opened, funding was reduced to one year, and ultimately, stopped taking enrollments eight months after its opening. One participant stated this time she was pushed out by the state, not by her own doing. The educational system has failed these students yet again with nowhere to go except for a GED.

One of the administrators believed all the site coordinators were doing an excellent job. “One of the things that we know, we have high success rates, but it’s because the

schools have site support there, and they do a really good job. One teacher, on the other hand, had a different opinion of many of the site coordinators.

There were a few site coordinators out there that would help them...but there were very few of those. ...Some of the site coordinators, I talked to 'em, and they said, 'well, when we signed [them] up and told 'em they could come in, and they'd come in signed up, and we never saw 'em again. They won't answer phone calls, and they won't return phone calls and we don't know where they are.'

Another administrator expressed a different view of the lack of support from outlying site coordinators and regional outreach personnel about the GNM program and the instructors' and administrators' vision for the program.

There's no research to guide us. I feel like in the office we had an innate understanding of what needed to be done, but try to translate that to a regional center 200miles away. They've never even taught online. They don't know enough about Ideal New Mexico even to recognize in some ways our big picture, so and possibly even the GNM picture. They're so removed. They didn't go to Santa Fe and visit with the GNM project manager. So, for us to help express our vision and how to help students and the kind of support student would have needed, that took a few months to even get going...So, that regional support, that foundation that we were trying to build, it just was starting to get off the ground whenever we had to shut down.

Could there be another level of support to seek out these students if personnel had been properly trained? If the superintendents supported the GNM program, would these students be served differently? All of these factors are deficits in program structure and implementation.

The teachers and administrators repeatedly discussed the deficits in their students at the cognitive, social, and technological levels. These students have repeatedly experienced failure in their lives. One teacher, who was criticized harshly by the students and held the opposite philosophical view from other teachers, spoke compassionately about the program closure and her students.

And, now we're here at the end. We have students who have taken classes and may be one credit away, and the program is ending; so they're stuck again...We talked about it a lot that even though some of them did not finish and do not have another opportunity to finish, this may have been the door open...the first little crack in the door for them to get their foot in, coming back to completing their education...I don't know how they're going to handle another failure, basically; another situation of dropping out.

Table 12 summarizes each research question by highlighting the key factors found in this research. Supporting comments were added to support the key findings.

Table 12. Key Findings

Research Question 1.0	What were the factors that led students to drop out of high school?	Examples
Findings	<p>The student-participants listed a number of reasons for dropping out of high school including: personal issues such as physical and mental illness; leaving at graduation due to a lack of graduation credits; grade retention and special education needs; teasing and bullying; deviant behaviors including high absenteeism, drug use, school disciplinary issues, non-engagement with school, teachers, or peers; pregnancy; family issues centering around financial support of the family and family structure.</p> <p>Students are pushed-out and pulled-out of school.</p> <p>Social Integration Theory (Durkheim), Theory of Social Control (Hirshi, Tinto) and Engagement Theory explain the engagement and disengagement students experience in high school leading them to drop out.</p>	<p>“I usually didn’t want to go most of the time because of the people...I was missing so much school...I was going through a depression. I had anxiety. I went to another school...cause all my friends were there...but it ended up being different...I stopped going after like a month around there.” Juan</p> <p>“It wasn’t that I dropped out, I just never actually finished. I failed a class in my senior year. I just never went back for that one extra credit.” Jim</p> <p>“My sister started doing drugs, and we’re really, really close so she kind of pulled me in that directions, too...I was on track to graduate, and I kind of went the opposite of what I should have though.” Christie</p>

Table 12 Continued

<p>Implications</p>	<p>Schools must foster a welcoming environment and a sense of belonging to the community in each student. Interventions must be implemented when a student is identified as dropping out.</p> <p>Personal, family, and disciplinary issues must be addressed with an intervention to keep the student positively engaged in the school with teachers and peers.</p> <p>Family education must be developed so that families value education and communicate this value to students even if the parents did not finish high school.</p>	<p>“I left school because my father got very ill...that was the end of his income...I left school to help around the house and take care of things that needed to be taken care of...There wasn’t enough money to raise five children...So I had to go to work.” Rosanne</p> <p>“I am very short and small and I was teased and bullied a lot. School really wasn’t a comfortable and safe environment for me. I wasn’t learning as fast as the other kids and sometimes the teachers that I had didn’t have very much patience and didn’t want to give me that one-on-one. So I fell behind.” Tommy</p> <p>“I was pregnant with my second child and just going through it was really tough. I was just so tired all the time. I felt like I couldn’t really do it. I couldn’t concentrate.” Verna</p> <p>“I just hated school, and I wanted to go work.” Adrian</p> <p>“They’re not dropouts; their push-outs; that the school system has failed them and that if we did things a little differently, that we might not lose so many students.” Administrator</p>
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Table 12 Continued

Research Question 2.0	What factors led students to return to high school?	
Findings	<p>Student-participants could not return to a traditional high school because they were overage and would feel embarrassed.</p> <p>Students wanted to return to high school to earn a diploma to secure a job or job promotion, to improve their quality of life, for self-satisfaction and role modeling for their children.</p> <p>GED was not equivalent to a high school diploma in the eyes of the student-participants.</p>	<p>“My future is not steady yet because I still haven’t finished high school. And once I finish that, you know, we got all these open doors. And, now we don’t have any open doors because I haven’t got my high school diploma yet.” Jose</p> <p>“To be a manager, I have to have a high school diploma...I’ve got to have that piece of paper in my hand.” Patience</p>
Implications	<p>The GNM program was an important opportunity for the student-participants to re-gain what they had lost.</p> <p>For this population of students, an online program meets their needs and provides an educational option to improve their lives.</p>	<p>“A lot of it was their job...they couldn’t advance anymore.” Teacher</p> <p>“It makes me feel like I took the easy way out...It doesn’t put me on that spot like, yes, I can accomplish something, being on top of my class or something. GED, the easy way out...It shows that you’re lazy...That you can’t do nothing with yourself, that you always have to find the easy way out.” Antonio</p> <p>“I wanted to show my son that it helps, you know, to better your life and stuff like that...He’s struggling a lot, too, and he’s like wanting to drop out and I wanna show him that dropping out isn’t the right choice.” Patience</p>

Table 12 Continued

		“I won’t feel like a failure no more, 'cause right now I feel like a failure 'cause I didn’t finish high school.” Antonio
Research Question 2.1	What factors prompted dropout students to return for a high school diploma program online instead of returning to a face-to-face high school class?	
Findings	<p>The factors that prompted student-participants to enroll in an online program was the GNM program itself, the anytime, anywhere asynchronous nature of the online program, and career and college entry with an earned diploma.</p> <p>Student-participants were vocal about the difference between the high school diploma and the GED. They did not want to be seen as taking shortcuts to earn a high school credential, but doing the work and getting credit for it.</p>	<p>“I moved from Idaho to New Mexico and the I found out that over the age of 19, there’s really nothing out there that you can do in the area that I’m in...there was really no place for me unless I wanted my GED and I kept telling them I wanted to finish high school...In New Mexico, they never offered anything like that until Graduate New Mexico came.” Rebecca</p>
Implications	<p>New Mexico is a state of poverty and low educational ranking.</p> <p>There are few large urban areas to provide needed educational services.</p> <p>GNM is an opportunity to reaches every dropout in the state because it is tuition-free.</p>	<p>“I mean when you’re not working, it’s hard, because \$20.00 per test, and there’s what five tests to take. It’s \$100.00...I don’t have \$100.00 to spare...there’s not funding for it or anything like that.” Patience</p> <p>I went to it wondering how much it was gonna cost and that’s when I saw that it was free...” Sally</p> <p>“They realize that without a high school diploma they can’t get a good job. They can’t advance.” Administrator</p>

Table 12 Continued

“When I found out I was just like two credits away from making it, from getting my high school diploma, I figured, you know, I have to hurry up and finish this, tri and do this. Get this obstacle out of my way.” Maria

“They’ve been working in minimum wage, dead end jobs, so they thought this was the way to move ahead. A lot of ‘em were to provide better support for the family.”
Teacher

“For me, A GED is like a shortcut...And for me getting the high school diploma was actually doing the work to get it...And I’m proving to them that I could get my high school diploma, and I didn’t take the shortcut.” Rebecca

“That’s been one of the things that is getting to me, that I hadn’t finished, I haven’t finished, so I can’t go on with college like I want to.” Mary

Table 12 Continued

Research Question 3.0	What factors do high school dropouts returning to school believe will help them complete an online course in a high school diploma completion program?	
Findings	The student-participants listed the following factors as related to their success in their online course work: convenience, self-pacing and flexibility, elimination of transportation to a campus, reduced childcare needs, communication, tutoring, curriculum rigor, technology, attention from teachers, and safety and focus.	We want to know that we can get another chance, a second change to do good to finish.” Antonio “These adults are craving [education]; they want it.” Teacher
Implications	<p>The lengthy list of factors related to successful course completion is long and is a sign of health for the GNM program.</p> <p>The teachers and administrators are dedicated professionals who gave of themselves to make the program as successful as it was in the short time it was open. Twenty students overall completed diploma requirements and are living a more fulfilled life.</p> <p>Community partnerships were formed by GNM but there is no data to determine effectiveness of these programs.</p> <p>The GNM program is an important program for the State of New Mexico and needs to continue for dropout students.</p>	<p>“Without GNM I don’t think I would’ve gotten my diploma.” Lilly</p> <p>“Knowing that you can log onto your account and do your courses anywhere. And, knowing that it’s there 24-7.” Tommy</p> <p>“It was that I could do it on my own time, and that I didn’t have to go anywhere and I didn’t have to pay for a babysitter... And, the, I don’t have transportation either, cause it’s hard...” Brianna</p> <p>“It was free, there was no charge, and it was convenient online stuff that I could do. I didn’t have to go to a classroom every day.” Christie</p>

Table 12 Continued

“I was learning at my own pace, and I could sit there and read it all over again...If I didn’t get something, I would go back and read it again because I knew I had the time...” Mary

“They realized that they could do it more on their own time or when they had the opportunity...They would do it on their own was probably one of the motivating factors.” Teacher

“You have direct contact with the teachers and you can talk to them through email.”
Alicia

“Extremely encouraging. I could talk to her on the phone when I was stuck, and she’d be like, ‘You’re gonna be fine.’ She was awesome.”
Rosanne

“I went to a local alternative school and the teachers were more than willing to help me if I needed any tutoring or if I needed any extra help, or if I needed to use the computers. They were very supportive I what I was doing which made things a lot easier.” Rebecca

“...They gave you everything you needed, so there was no questions about what needed to be done or where to find the materials. It was all

Table 12 Continued

		there. They gave you all the information you needed.” Rebecca
		“It was definitely a challenge; it wasn’t just something you could breeze through. But, it was intriguing, it wasn’t boring either.” Jim
		“Pretty self-explanatory but you just have to learn how to read and take your time in how you’re reading, try to navigate it. If you actually read it right, it will take you where you want to go.” Maria
		“They [technical support] would help me right away, or something would be fixed within about 24 hours.” Mike
Research Question 3.1	What resources will help students successfully complete an online program?	
Findings	The most important resource the student-participants enjoyed were the social resources of spouse, family, children, teachers, and friends in their social circle. Support from them provided help and encouragement to complete course work.	“I thought there would be a lot more classroom assignments, like where you sat down with the teacher, use like a video conference, more like a chat room.” Lilly
Implications	Not all resources were in place such as an orientation class for new students. Resources for special education students were missing.	“I think that the module on a tutorial prep of getting these students’ online learning environment would be been a great front-end piece to save time throughout.” Teacher

Table 12 Continued

<p>Strong relationship with the teacher is crucial to success.</p>	<p>“A lot of 'em were just signed up without any information about what the program was about, how they needed to do it, and the support that comes after it—somebody to sit there by the computer and help them manipulate the course.” Teacher</p>
<p>Supplemental textbooks, a face-to-face orientation class, an online library, Internet access in rural areas, and stronger technical support were needed and could be considered factors related to successful course completion.</p>	<p>“My husband supported me a lot. I had him, and my mom has always been there for me and told me I had to go to school and finish because she didn't finish, but she wants me to do it.” Mary</p>
	<p>“I just wasn't understanding it [class]. It didn't make any sense to me, and he [husband] pushed me and would hold my hand and he talked me through it, and he was very helpful with the household chores and cooking and stuff.” Lilly</p>
	<p>“It showed that I was enrolled on [the class]. When I clicked on it, it came up blank. There was nothing there. So, the technical team had to fix it, and it took them about a week and a half.” Lilly</p>
	<p>“Internet access was really important... There's no 24/7 support here.” Teacher</p>

Table 12 Continued

		<p>“I honestly wouldn’t have gotten through that class if I did not have my girlfriend’s psychology book...I got most of my help through that actual book itself.” Mike</p> <p>“I offered to be in a computer lab...I started off from 4:00 to 7:00...Physically come in, I’ll help you with your class, I’ll help you with your computer issues. A couple of the, that’s all they needed.” Teacher</p>
Research Question 3.2	What factors of the online program will help students succeed when compared to their former high school educational experience?	
Findings	Key findings included learner readiness, attention from teachers, convenience and safety and focus issues.	“Online courses you can take them whenever you want in the day or the night or whatever time.” Juan
Implications	<p>Student-participants view of learner readiness was much different than teachers’ views of learner readiness.</p> <p>The student-participants had a demonstrated loss of high school knowledge in the academic cognitive, social, and technology areas.</p> <p>For student-participants of post-secondary age there was a distinct gap in knowledge as compared to their peers of the same age.</p>	<p>“The grades that I got—I was surprised on the grades I actually got, because if I was in high school I’d be getting Cs and Ds and Fs, and I was getting As and Bs.” Brianna</p> <p>“At least when you’re at home working on a computer, you don’t have peer pressure or anything like that.” Sally</p>

Table 12 Continued

“I hated going down the freshmen hallway just 'cause kids are rude and like if you bump into them, they'll like want to start a fight or something...they have like street credit or something.”
Kelly

“I would have to say the online experience was better in a lot of ways just because I didn't have the constant distractions. In high school you have nothing but friends there...I was friends with everyone. I knew almost everyone in the school, that we were all friends, very friendly. Everyone knew who I was, but it was a constant battle because I had to keep up and do that, as opposed to when I was on the computer, I could just do my school work.” John

“Like if I didn't understand it, I could go back and reread it, and then I would understand it. I didn't end up having to sit in the classroom listening to the teacher try and explain it and get confused with the other students. 'Cause that's how it was for me in high school.”
Sandy

“Any time I had a question, they would respond immediately which was amazing.” Tommy

Table 12 Continued

		<p>“It just was interesting to me to see that there are really huge gaps, not only in education skills, but in technology.” Teacher</p> <p>“I saw online that their skills were very low.” Teacher</p> <p>“For the GNM students it was they often didn’t have the academic and self-discipline skills that they would have needed in the first place or else they would have finished school in a lot of cases.” Administrator</p> <p>“I am dyslexic, I have ADD...[Being dyslexic and ADD] didn’t impact me at all.” Lilly</p>
Research questions 3.3	What are the challenges and barriers to course completion?	
Findings	<p>The outstanding challenges and barriers for student are illness, work schedules, attitude toward school, reading ability, study skills, lack of academic and learner readiness, and lack of Internet access and computer hardware.</p> <p>The student-participants did not want to be part of a community of learners in contrast to theoretical frameworks and research.</p>	<p>“It’s been ten years since I’ve been in school, so getting back into the whole mindset of studying and reading, just getting back into the whole motion...I’ve stepped outside of proper English and grammar, and it was helping me get back into the hang of all that...” Sally</p>

Table 12 Continued

Implications	<p>The challenges and barriers at the administrative level poor program planning, lack of buy-in from superintendents and support from some site coordinators, lack of support from other personnel and collateral resources,</p>	<p>“The discussion boards were definitely difficult because, you, know, everyone’s in their different areas of the actual course. The expectations that were set were that we have to have X amount within a certain week. The teacher should try to help us out...because there was times that I was waiting like a week or two for someone to respond to my stuff.” Mike.</p>
	<p>Student-participants were enrolled in an academic program but also learned many problem solving and life lessons.</p>	
	<p>Students-participants may transfer their learning to other parts of their lives.</p>	<p>“They weren’t really interested in communicating with other people. They just wanted to get it done.”</p>
	<p>Student-participants may have developed a love of learning and a value for education in their lives.</p>	<p>Teacher “The older the student was, the more trouble they had usually [with technology].”</p>
	<p>The GNM program should be a standalone program supervised the Secretary of Education for the state.</p>	<p>Teacher</p>
	<p>The GNM program must define who their students are.</p>	<p>“...A place where they can go to have access to the technology, because it’s a poverty issue.</p>
	<p>The GNM program must find its own identity.</p>	<p>They don’t have the money to get their Internet. Several students that, as we were working with them, ‘Well my Internet got shut off, so I couldn’t come to class.’ You try to tell ‘em, ‘Well, there’s other places to go. They’re just not aware.’” Teacher</p>
	<p>Teachers who understand the nature and culture of dropout students are appropriate for staffing teaching positions.</p>	
	<p>GNM has the potential to be an outstanding program for dropouts and recognized nationally.</p>	

Table 12 Continued

“The hardest thing right now is reading. Like reading a lot, like it frustrates me, like it’s a lot...Because I don’t like to read that much. When I see the content like it’s a lot of reading it kind of frustrates me 'cause I think I’ll never finish.” Juan

“Plagiarism was a huge one for us that we were constantly bucking against—plagiarism and what constitutes plagiarism...” Teacher

“They were using text language to write to, to correspond to us and to write their papers. They didn’t know how to spell, so they were using text language in their papers.” Teacher

“We had to instruct them in those life skill kind of things; the time management and planning.” Teacher

“When my mom had to work in the afternoons, and I couldn’t do anything because I had to take care of my sister.” Juan

Table 12 Continued

“It’s been difficult trying to manage my classes with my work... Working around my schedule has been hard for me because we have to survive... I think it is basically my work; me having to go out and work all day long in the hot sun and have to come home and sit down on the computer.”
Tommy

“Cause I thought I could take my time and do my classes... It was just too complicated... 'Cause it said that I had to like converse with my peers or whatever, and I had to look stuff up, and my computer wouldn’t open pages that it’s telling me to open, and I was just like, ‘Wow, this is stupid,’ So I pretty much just quit that.”
Adrian

“They were in the mindset that, well this program’s just gonna give me my high school diploma. They didn’t realize that they had to go to school, they had to turn in assignments, they had to do work, they had to work at an education—it wasn’t just gonna be given to them”
Teacher

Table 12 Continued

“I think from start to finish it was a disaster, truly. I think it was poorly planned out, I think it was poorly executed, I mean I know it’s awful to say that, but being in the trenches with it and seeing mismanagement of millions of dollars...It could have been very successful had the right protocols been put into place and the right steps for those students and other things like that.” Teacher

“We just kind of opened the flood gates and let anybody in there. I guess that it (GNM) was just ill conceived, ill planned and ill carried out I think...”
Teacher

“The most successful ones were gonna be the ones that were seniors and needed on or two credits to graduate. Those were the ones that you could’ve really helped, but we were getting kids that dropped out in their freshman year.” Teacher

“The courses were already made, but part of my job here was also to enhance courses and make them better... We found a lot of flaws in how they were developed.”
Teacher

Table 12 Continued

“You have to have people who understand this population and are willing to work with them because it’s not the traditional classroom and it’s not ‘Oh, well, you have to suck it up. This is school. This is your second shot.’...a great instructor who understands what they’re walking into.” Teacher

Summary

From the data collected three additional pieces of information emerged. As I reflected on the stories the student-participants shared and the accounts of the experiences of the teachers and administrators three threads of information became evident. First, dropout students appeared to be in a state of arrested development when they entered the GNM program. Their academic skills were the same or less compared to when they left high school. As the teachers and administrators observed, the students appeared to have cognitive, social, and technology deficits. Academic writing and teacher communication skills were unacceptable and inaccurate. Students struggled to complete assignments adequately and in the correct academic form. The most telling observation may have been when the teachers and administrators both agreed that their students were in adult bodies functioning with only high school brain development. Therefore, when the high school educational experience is interrupted, some of the natural academic development stops. But, can it be regained?

The second additional piece of information to emerge was that of the multi-generational nature of the GNM program. The students in this study ranged in age from 18-

47. The over 30 year old students were not exposed to computers in the classroom when they were in school. This group appears to have a different work ethic and was thankful for whatever the teachers could help them with. The under 30 students took on an attitude of entitlement and a lack of accountability in their work. They questioned why they had to do assignments the way the curriculum set them.

The third piece of information to emerge from the data was that of program accountability. The GNM program was introduced to help dropouts complete their secondary education but the program was closed within months of opening. This was devastating news to many students who found the opportunity they were looking for to complete their high school diploma. Once again, they have been pushed out of school.

Chapter V

Summary of Results, Implications, Recommendations and Significance

Chapter V discusses the results, implications, and recommendations for future research in relation to the research questions addressed in this study. The study findings answer the three main research questions that led the research. The first main question addressed the reasons the student-participants dropped out of high school. The second main question investigated the reasons the student-participants returned to high school. The third main question revealed the factors related to successful course completion in an online program for the returning dropout student-participants. The results of the sub-questions supplemented the findings of the first and third main questions.

1.0 What were the factors that led students to drop out of high school?

2.0 What factors led students to return to high school?

2.1 What factors prompted drop out students to return for a high school diploma program online instead of returning to a face-to-face high school class?

3.0 What factors do high school dropouts returning to school believe will help them complete an online course in a high school diploma completion program?

3.1 What resources will help students successfully complete an online program?

3.2 What factors of the online program will help students succeed when compared to their former high school educational experience?

3.3 What are the challenges and barriers to course completion?

The definition of a dropout student adopted for this study was an adult who dropped out of high school and had not earned a high school diploma or GED. The target audience for this study was students, over 18 years of age, enrolled in the Graduate New Mexico

(GNM) program who were actively taking a course or completed a course toward their diploma. Twenty-three interviews were conducted with student-participants enrolled in the GNM online high school diploma program. Two administrators and three full-time GNM instructors were interviewed to triangulate the data.

This research was conducted using a basic qualitative design with interviews employed as the method of inquiry. Following a question guide, open-ended questions were asked to answer the research questions with additional probing questions posed to expand the information or used for clarification. The data was sorted to answer the research questions.

Key Findings

Table 13 summarizes the key findings for each of the research questions discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Table 13. Key Findings

Research Question 1.0	What were the factors that led students to drop out of high school?
Findings	<p>The student-participants listed a number of reasons for dropping out of high school including: personal issues such as physical and mental illness; leaving at graduation due to a lack of graduation credits; grade retention and special education needs; teasing and bullying; deviant behaviors including high absenteeism, drug use, school disciplinary issues, non-engagement with school, teachers, or peers; pregnancy; family issues centering around financial support of the family and family structure.</p> <p>Students are pushed-out and pulled-out of school.</p> <p>Social Integration Theory (Durkheim), Theory of Social Control (Hirshi, Tinto) and Engagement Theory explain the engagement and disengagement students experience in high school leading them to drop out.</p>

Table 13 Continued

Implications	<p>Schools must foster a welcoming environment and a sense of belonging to the community in each student. Interventions must be implemented when a student is identified as dropping out.</p> <p>Personal, family, and disciplinary issues must be addressed with an intervention to keep the student positively engaged in the school with teachers and peers.</p> <p>Family education must be developed so that families value education and communicate this value to students even if the parents did not finish high school.</p>
Research Question 2.0 What factors led students to return to high school?	
Findings	<p>Student-participants could not return to a traditional high school because they were overage and would feel embarrassed.</p> <p>Students wanted to return to high school to earn a diploma to secure a job or job promotion, to improve their quality of life, for self-satisfaction and role modeling for their children.</p> <p>GED was not equivalent to a high school diploma in the eyes of the student-participants.</p>
Implications	<p>The GNM program was an important opportunity for the student-participants to re-gain what they had lost.</p> <p>For this population of students, an online program meets their needs and provides an educational option to improve their lives.</p>
Research Questions 2.1 What factors prompted dropout students to return for a high school diploma program online instead of returning to a face-to-face high school class?	
Findings	<p>The factors that prompted student-participants to enroll in an online program was the GNM program itself, the anytime, anywhere asynchronous nature of the online program, and career and college entry with an earned diploma.</p>
Implications	<p>New Mexico is a state of poverty and low educational ranking.</p> <p>There are few large urban areas to provide needed educational services.</p> <p>GNM is an opportunity to reach every dropout in the state because it is tuition-free.</p>

Table 13 Continued

Research Question 3.0	What factors do high school dropouts returning to school believe will help them complete an online course in a high school diploma completion program?
Findings	<p>The student-participants listed the following factors as related to their success in their online course work: convenience, self-pacing and flexibility, elimination of transportation to a campus, reduced childcare needs, communication, tutoring, curriculum rigor, technology, attention from teachers, and safety and focus.</p>
Implications	<p>The lengthy list of factors related to successful course completion is long and is a sign of health for the GNM program.</p> <p>The teachers and administrators are dedicated professionals who gave of themselves to make the program as successful as it was in the short time it was open.</p> <p>Twenty students overall completed diploma requirements and are living a more fulfilled life.</p> <p>Community partnerships were formed by GNM but there is no data to determine effectiveness of these programs.</p> <p>The GNM program is an important program for the State of New Mexico and needs to continue for dropout students.</p>
Research Question 3.1	What resources will help students successfully complete an online program?
Findings	<p>The most important resource the student-participants enjoyed were the social resources of spouse, family, children, teachers, and friends in their social circle. Support from them provided help and encouragement to complete course work.</p>
Implications	<p>Not all resources were in place.</p> <p>Resources for special education students were missing.</p> <p>Strong relationship with the teacher is crucial to success.</p> <p>Supplemental textbooks, a face-to-face orientation class, an online library, Internet access in rural areas, and stronger technical support were needed and could be considered factors related to successful course completion.</p>

Table 13 Continued

Research Question 3.2	What factors of the online program will help students succeed when compared to their former high school educational experience?
Findings	Key findings included learner readiness, attention from teachers, and safety and focus issues.
Implications	<p>Student-participants view of learner readiness was much different than teachers' views of learner readiness.</p> <p>The student-participants had a demonstrated loss of high school knowledge in the academic cognitive, social, and technology areas.</p> <p>For student-participants of post-secondary age there was a distinct gap in knowledge as compared to their peers of the same age.</p> <p>The student-participants did not want to be part of a community of learners in contrast to theoretical frameworks and research.</p>
Research questions 3.3	What are the challenges and barriers to course completion?
Findings	<p>The outstanding challenges and barriers for student are illness, work schedules, attitude toward school, reading ability, study skills, lack of academic and learner readiness, and lack of Internet access and computer hardware.</p> <p>The challenges and barriers at the administrative level poor program planning, lack of buy-in from superintendents and support from some site coordinators, lack of support from other personnel and collateral resources,</p>
Implications	<p>Student-participants were enrolled in an academic program but also learned many problem solving and life lessons.</p> <p>Students-participants may transfer their learning to other parts of their lives.</p> <p>Student-participants may have developed a love of learning and a value for education in their lives.</p> <p>The GNM program should be a stand alone program supervised the Secretary of Education for the state.</p>

Table 13 Continued

The GNM program must define who their students are.
The GNM program must find its own identity.
Teachers who understand the nature and culture of dropout students are appropriate for staffing teaching positions.
GNM has the potential to be an outstanding program for dropouts and recognized nationally.

Research Question 1.0: What were the factors that led students to drop out of high school?

The reasons given for dropping out of school fall into two categories: individual and institutional. The individual reasons were personal health, leaving school at graduation due to a lack of graduation credits, grade retention and special education needs, deviant behaviors such high absenteeism, drug use, and school disciplinary issues, pregnancy, and the influence of peers. The institutional reasons shared by the student-participants for dropping out of high school included non-engagement with the school, teachers, or peers, teasing and bullying, family issues centering around financial support of the family and the structure of the family. These reasons for leaving school early were found in Rumberger and Lim's (2008) meta-analysis of school dropouts over a 25 year period. The reasons for leaving school appear not to have changed.

Whether the reasons for dropping out of high school are individual or institutional the root of the problem is deeper and is at the school level. The student-participants were either pushed-out of school or pulled-out of school. Stearns and Glennie (2006) discuss the push-out and pull-out theories in their research. The student-participants who were pushed-out of

school left school feeling unwelcome and unwanted. The student-participants were teased and bullied by peers, teachers could not meet their educational needs and a number of the female student-participants were pregnant during high school resulting in high absenteeism due to child care issues. Those student-participants who were pulled out of school were lured away by the influence of peers using drugs, by the financial analysis that employment and earning money was more appealing than school, and by the necessity to help financially support their family due to parental illness or single parenthood. Educational systems and policymakers must take responsibility for this situation.

The theoretical frameworks of this study help to explain the reasons given for leaving high school early. Archambault et al. (2010) discussed Hirshi's Theory of Social Control addressing a human being's natural need to belong to a community. While some participants talked about having friends, even some who encouraged them to stay in school, it was not enough to create a feeling of belonging due to retention in a grade, repetition of a course, or high absenteeism or behavioral issues. These factors made it difficult to face friends and offer an explanation about why they have not moved on with their cohorts.

Numbers of the participants detailed their unhappiness during their high school experience due to teasing, bullying, and negative perceptions felt from teachers and principals that they were not wanted in the school community. Social Integration Theory addressed the need to be happy in life by validation of the community or die by means of suicide. "Die" and "suicide" were metaphors in the case of the student-participants who dropped out of school. Tinto (1975) supported this view in his discussions of academic and social experiences in school. They felt they were not wanted in their schools, teachers were unable to pay attention to them, there was social chaos in classrooms, and their learning

needs and difficulties went unaddressed or undiagnosed by the school. One participant's view of disengagement and non-integration was that school was a place to learn and get help. For him, neither was happening.

Shneiderman (1994) and Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999) explained Engagement Theory as being engaged in classroom activities, working collaboratively with others, and solving problems. Some of the student-participants had a difficult time accepting school rules and participating in classroom and school activities. To keep students engaged in the classroom, curriculum design must be interesting, creative, and relevant to students. Understanding each student's needs, learning interests and characteristics, such as the participants who were pregnant, or the young man who does not deal easily with the school structure, or the rigidity of the curriculum, might have resulted in a student who stayed in school and earned graduation. How the school day was structured should take into consideration the needs of the students. After school and community service activities may help to engage students who drift away from the school due to high absenteeism or disciplinary infractions. Teachers and administrators showing interest in each student, whether academically or personally, and intervening through tutoring, referral for suspected learning difficulties, and referral to needed out-of-school resources is critical to offsetting potential dropouts.

Clearly, the adolescent years were difficult for the participants. High school was not a one-size-fits all event. Stearns and Glennie (2006), using Erickson's developmental theory, make note that adolescence is a turbulent time of self-discovery and transition. Leaving high school appears to have interrupted the developmental educational process, as if a developmental window had been closed. The student-participants were now adults with

adult responsibilities but “stuck” in high school as far as the quality of their lives. They were no longer members of their peer cohort and did not have the connections to the peers they once had. Friendships were lost and many experienced life differently than their high school peers who earned their diplomas and graduated on time with their classmates.

An issue that was not directly asked about but was part of a few interviews was parental value of education and the parents’ educational backgrounds. Parents are the first teachers of their children. They impart not only knowledge but family values. A few student-participants talked about their parents’ educational values. In general, parents of the dropouts did not object to students with high absenteeism and did not object to student-participants skipping school. A few student-participants spoke voluntarily that their parents did not finish high school. One student-participant who was not happy in school stated that he talked with his parents, and they went to the school and disenrolled him. Another spoke of one parent who was abusive, left the family. Ultimately, the mother also abandoned the family. The message was clear to the student-participant that she and her siblings were not valued as children much less their educational progress. Rumberger and Lim (2008) and Croninger and Lee (2001) stress the point that parental communication of the value of education was paramount to keeping a student in school whether the parents have high school educations or not. These parental behaviors brought into question the value these parents held for education and for their children.

It is important that the educational system implement interventions when a student is identified as dropping out. Not every student may fit in a traditionally structured school but every student should have a school option to receive the same high school education as if they were in a traditional school. This may include online learning such as enrollment in the

Florida Virtual School under the supervision of the local school district. Interventions must also include parent education about the importance of their child staying in school to receive a diploma. If the American standard for an educated person is, at minimum, earning a high school diploma, then this must be a priority in every community.

Research Question 2.0: What factors led students to return to high school?

The main factor that kept the student-participants from returning to high school is age. New Mexico law prevented students from returning to high school after the age of 18, or 23 if the student was classified as a special education student. If a student left high school for any length of time past the age of 18 they were shut out of the secondary school system in New Mexico. This was a situation that was out of the control of all but one student-participant. Kelly was the only student-participant who returned to traditional high school to complete one class and graduate. After a four month hospitalization out of state and a few months of recuperative time, Kelly decided to return first to the GNM program and then the local school district e-academy to complete her classes. Finally, she planned to return to her local high school to finish her final course and graduate because she was within the accepted age range for traditional high school students.

Research Question 2.1: What factors prompted dropout students to return for a high school diploma program online instead of returning to a face-to-face high school class?

The primary reasons students returned to high school online was the GNM program itself, the anytime, anywhere asynchronous nature of the GNM program, and access to higher education and career entry.

The opening of the GNM program itself was an important opportunity for the student-participants. It was the opportunity the student-participants were seeking to complete their education and improve their quality of life.

The anytime, anywhere nature of the asynchronous program was the strongest feature attracting the student-participants to enroll in an online program. Barcelona (2009), Milligan and Bechenmeyer (2008), Mupinga (2005), and Prasad, (1998) found those students with jobs could manage their online classroom time and course work around their employment schedules. As adults, the student-participants had adult responsibilities, some with jobs while others were caring for children. The online, asynchronous nature of the GNM program allowed them the flexibility they needed to attend to adult responsibilities and also attend to course work.

By having the opportunity to complete their diploma requirements online, the student-participants had an opportunity for career entry and entry to higher education. While a GED would suffice in some cases, there were fields in which career entry required a diploma, such as some college programs and military enlistment.

New Mexico, ranked as the 48th most education and poverty stricken state in 2008, had only 12 of 50 cities with populations over 20,000. This was not a state with a number of large urban areas which can provide services such as education easily to its citizens. Essentially, these two factors of isolation and poverty prompted most student-participants to choose an online program. The GNM program was a state-wide, tuition free program. This was the formula that attracted many students. If a dropout student had a computer, printer, and access to the Internet, the student had the needed equipment to enroll in the GNM

program. The GNM program offered a beginning to their journey toward diploma recovery and economic recovery for the individual and the state.

Research Question 3.0: What factors do high school dropouts returning to school believe will help them complete an online course in a high school diploma completion program?

The student-participants listed the following factors as related to their success in their online course work: convenience of online education, flexibility, self-pacing, elimination of transportation to a campus, reduced childcare needs, communication, tutoring, curriculum rigor, technology support, attention from teachers, and safety and focus.

Student-participants not only chose GNM for the GNM program itself as the option to complete a high school diploma, but chose GNM for convenience. The anytime, anywhere availability of the program gave student-participants flexibility in when to study during the day, enabling them to work around busy work schedules. The student-participants were not locked into a start and end date as a traditional semester would require. Beqiri and Chase (2010) found that online education was a “just in time” solution for many adult students who had to take care of work responsibilities as well as home and family obligations. Student-participants in the online program did not always live in convenient areas to a campus. The online option eliminated the need for transportation and saved time. Because student-participants who were parents did not have to travel to a campus, childcare needs were reduced which Barcelona (2009) and Mupinga (2005) supported in their research. Milligan and Beckenmeyer (2008), Mupinga, (2005) Parad, (1998) and Song et al. (2004) reported similar findings to Beqiri and Chase and added that students online did not have to consume

large amounts of time to travel to and from campus. This eliminated the need for transportation and was time efficient.

Communication and tutoring were strong positive factors related to successful course completion for student-participants. The opportunity for student-participants to communicate with their teachers was highly applauded. The student-participants had easy access to teachers by email, telephone, and on the Blackboard learning management system for tutoring or clarifications of instructions which Lee et al. (2011) reported as success factors for students. The student-participants reported a factor related to success was the undivided attention they received from the teachers that went hand-in-hand with teacher communication and tutoring. Because tutoring was online or over the telephones there were no teacher interruptions from other students, diverting the teacher's attention away from them. Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) pointed out that strong social presence opened the lines of communication between student and teacher and develops a caring, nurturing relationship. For the student-participants teacher accessibility through email, telephone, and the learning management system was crucial. To be able to connect with the teacher, one-on-one, gave the students the feeling that they were important, they counted, and it built their self-esteem. Many of the student-participants had very negative experiences in high school with strong negative feelings about teachers. They did not believe teachers or administrators cared about them. The social presence created by the teachers, that is, the personal and academic frequent connections the GNM teachers made with the student-participants, was the overwhelming support and encouragement this group of dropouts needed to finish their course work. This relationship with the students helped the students feel as though they belonged to an academic community, even though they did not want a community of inquiry.

The sense of belongingness, which lowers the feelings of distance between the student-participants and the teacher, worked in tandem with the environment of strong social presence, to keep the student-participants engaged in their online course work and complete classes. Strong social presence in combination with low transactional distance was essential to student success in online courses. Jackson, Jones and Rodriguez (2010) found in their research that teachers who had strong, frequent communication with their students had students with successful course outcomes and Chen and Willits (1999) found low transactional distance led to more successful student outcomes.

Technology navigation and support were important elements cited by student-participants. Student-participants who felt comfortable with technology reported ease in navigation of the course websites. Some student-participants had some navigational problems at first but were able to work through their difficulties. Only one student-participant had no computer experience at all but managed with the help of teachers and the technology help desk at GNM. Lee et al. (2011) recommends that knowing where to get technical help was key to factors relating to successful course completion. Student-participants liked the technology websites because the courses were all inclusive, meaning that all the teaching materials needed to complete each course were contained on the website. If student-participants found problems with the course content, they alerted their teachers. Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1997) reported that the interface of students and technology held equal status with other interfaces such as curriculum content and teachers. Smart and Cappel (2006), Muilenburg and Berge (2005) and Song et al. (2004) determined that prior technology experience and familiarity helped to increase student success.

The student-participants' views of curriculum rigor and pacing were positive. The student-participants found the curriculum had appropriate rigor for them. The self-pacing guide developed their time management skills and kept them on task. Student-participants discovered they had to be in charge of their own learning while the teacher became the facilitator of information. Self-pacing using a pacing guide was a tool the student-participants found successful. They were held responsible for completing assignments within a time frame but could study to master the material and move at their own pace, not falling behind others or waiting for others to catch up. Beqiri and Chase (2010) pointed out that students must become active in their own learning. Palmer and Holt (2009) and Schubert-Irastorza and Fabry (2011) remind online learners that the online teacher's role is to provide the learning materials, links, and instructions on the course website.

Many of the GNM dropout student-participants had negative traditional high school experiences. Cockling (1990) and Goldman and Bradley (1996) found in their research that the more negative the high school experience, the longer it takes for the student to return to school. The student-participants in the GNM program found the online experience to be safe from peers distracting them, and allowing them to focus on their studies in their homes. The student-participants safety and the opportunity to focus on their studies were factors related to their successful course completion.

The list compiled from the student-participants of factors related to successful course completion is lengthy but essential. It is a sign of program health that student-participants found such strengths in the online program. The GNM teachers' expertise and dedication to their students was demonstrated in the list of success factors. With the program being actively open for only eight months, the GNM teachers and administrators created an online

learning environment that served the student-participants as well as it was able. Although teachers and administrators recognized there were deficits in the students overall in the cognitive, social, and technology areas, they realized the students were “craving” education. In addition to teachers tutoring students, community partnerships were set up but the student-participants did not mention attending any community agency for help. At this time, there is no data to determine if the community partnerships were effective.

During the time the program was open about 20 students completed course work and earned a diploma. Four of the 23 were student-participants in this study. They were able to achieve their goal and follow their dreams to college entry and career entry. They are now proud people, with renewed self-esteem and a diploma hanging on their wall. The student-participants who did not have enough time to complete diploma requirements were angry and disappointed that the State of New Mexico reneged on an opportunity they had been so desperately seeking. The GNM program is an important program for the State of New Mexico and needs to continue for the betterment of the state and for the many dropouts in New Mexico.

Research Question 3.1: What resources will help students successfully complete an online program?

The most important resource the student-participants expressed was the social resources they enjoyed, that is, the support and help received from spouses, family, children, teachers, and friends. For those student-participants in rural areas, some of the site coordinators gave important support for their successful completion of courses. The student-participants shared stories of spouses giving encouragement to complete course work by clarifying instructions and helping to post assignments. Some shared stories of children and

friends helping to learn how to use a computer, send email, and navigate the course website. One student-participant shared that grandparents were restructuring finances for Internet access and computer hardware because education was important. Without these social resources the student-participants may not have completed their course work.

The teachers were very proud of the tutoring services they provided the student-participants. Their efforts to stay available to student-participants by email, telephone, face-to-face tutoring at times, and on Blackboard was strongly reflected in the student-participants comments.

Not all resources were in place. Given time and attention, the GNM program could improve and consider the following factors related to successful course completion. A few students found the need for a physical textbook for clarification of the online information, for supplemental information, and for additional practice problems. An online library for extra academic support would be a positive resource for students.

The administrators and teachers came to the realization that the students did not understand the dynamics of online education. Only two student-participants had any online education experience prior to admission into the GNM program. Many student-participants shared that they would have valued a face-to-face orientation class because they did not know what to expect in an online class. The result was that student-participants had difficulty navigating the website, had trouble finding links to study materials and posting assignments, and fell behind on the pacing guide.

One particular group of student-participants may have needed extra attention and special resources. Several of the student-participants shared that they had special education needs. They particularly had low reading comprehension resulting from their diagnosis.

Even though the teachers were able to adjust curriculum, was it enough for these students? It may be an asset to the program if a teacher with special education background was part of the teaching staff. This teacher could work with the other teachers to adjust the curriculum, help this group of students with their pacing guides, and authorize adjustments to the 18 week time frame when necessary. The special needs teacher could help students with study skills and coping skills, embedding them in the curriculum. The student-participants clearly believed the communication with and tutoring received from the teachers were strengths of the GNM program.

From an infrastructure point of view, the teachers and administrators believed a stronger technical and Internet access support system was needed for successful course completion by students, especially those in rural areas. Student-participants fell behind in their course work because either their Internet access was not available to them because they could not afford to pay for Internet and Internet service was shut off.

If the reasons the student-participants left school early were reviewed, many situations resulted in lack of parent support for education which translates to lack of support for the student attending school. A few of the student-participants revealed that their parents did not finish high school which could underscore non-support. This may be due to the fact that the value of education in the family was never developed or passed down, or the parents had a bad experience in school, or they believe that the quality of their life was acceptable and they did not have any higher aspirations or expectations for their children. Croninger and Lee (2001) found that social resources such as spouse, family, peer, and teacher support were key relationships that help students remain engaged in school.

Forming good relationships particularly with teachers was an established factor related to successful course completion. Other resources that needed to be put into place were technical support, a face-to-face orientation program, strong Internet access, tutoring, and access to an online library and could be crucial factors for successful online course completion.

Research Question 3.2: What factors of the online program will help students succeed when compared to their former high school educational experience?

The key components of the online program that were different and helped student-participants succeed as compared to their high school experience were their learning readiness, attention from the teacher, and a learning atmosphere that enabled the student-participant to feel safe and stay focused on their learning task.

Learner readiness. The first difference from their experiences in high school was that student-participants were ready and motivated to learn. A few of the student-participants realized that being a bit older and mature helped them become more motivated to learn than when they were in high school. Even though some did not understand the demands of online education and had been looking for a program like GNM, they felt excited and ready to learn. Their motivation piqued. However, the student-participants idea of learner readiness was not the teachers' perspective on learner readiness.

From the teachers' perspective, the student-participants had a distinct lack of academic readiness for course work. For example, in communications with teachers and in formal academic writing assignments student-participants used text mail writing styles. Because student-participants left school early, they missed many of the lessons learned in high school which included formal and informal writing styles. With the delivery of the

online curriculum teachers embedded writing skills through feedback on academic papers, giving the student-participant a chance to rewrite their assignment and upgrade their skills. Another example was the agility with which the student-participants navigate the course websites. The student-participants were able to surf the web and mechanically use e-mail. However, many had some difficulty navigating the course site. This could be because they did not have the patience to read the instructions or they did not follow instructions on the website such as where to post an assignment or they lacked the technical skills many students learn in high school. Dupin-Bryant (2004) and Milligan and Beckenmeyer (2008) both advocate that students considering online education needed a pre-assessment for readiness for online education before registering for a course online and a strategy to help the students become viable online learners. This might help reduce student frustration and reduce course failure and dropout from online course work. Goldman and Bradley (1996) described a post-secondary online learner as self-directed, motivated, confident about learning and using computers, had a high GPA, and was successful in prior online courses. The GNM students overall were the age of post-secondary students but did not fit the description due to their loss of secondary schooling. There appeared to be a gap between the teachers' expectations and the student-participants' expectations of readiness for online learning which was a special challenge for the teachers and administrators of the GNM program. A pre-assessment strategy went hand in hand with an orientation program to bring students to learning readiness.

Attention. A second difference for many student-participants comparing their high school and online experience was the attention they received from the teachers. In their traditional high school experiences, many student-participants complained their education

and achievement was undermined by a lack of teacher attention due to chaotic classroom environments and a lack of differentiated instruction to address learning disabilities. This idea of uninterrupted teacher attention refers back to the concepts of low transactional distance, high social presence and teacher immediacy supported by many researchers such as Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2003), Gunawarden and Zittle (1997) Oliver, Osborne and Brady (2009) and Richardson and Swan (2003).

Safety and focus. The third difference comparing traditional high school and online education was the opportunity to study in a safe environment and to stay focused in their studies. Some of the reasons given for dropping out of traditional high school were the facts that student-participants were teased and bullied. This treatment by peers distracted many student-participants from staying focused on their studies. Online education enabled them to study at home in a safe environment and focus without distraction. Many student-participants found the isolation of GNM to be an advantage for them. Milligan and Buckenmeyer (2008) and Mupinga (2005) both pointed out that online education was not for everyone. But, in some cases, it may be the better choice.

To expand the points of safety and focus, the student-participants did not want to be part of an online community. It became clear in one class that some assignments were peer evaluation assignments. It was difficult for student-participants to complete this work because the asynchronous nature of the system allowed students to enroll and begin study at any time. Students in the class were at different assignment and learning points which made it difficult to pair with another student. There were no traditional set beginning and ending dates as with semesters in traditional high school. The student-participants were on their own timetable. They made it clear they did not want to speak with other students, some for

fear of ridicule. This was an interesting revelation and presents a contrasting view to Durkheim's and Tinto's Social Integration Theory, Hirshi's and Tinto's Theory of Social Control, and Shneiderman's Engagement Theory which all speak to students being part of a community of learning and working in collaborative groups to construct knowledge. The ideas of belonging to a community of learners was also supported in the research by Aragon and Johnson (2008), Jun (2005), Kember (1980), and Sherry (1996).

Research Question 3.3: What were the challenges and barriers to course completion?

The key challenges and barriers the student-participants experienced were illness, work schedules, attitude toward school, reading ability, study skills, lack of academic and learner readiness, and lack of Internet access or hardware. From the administrative and teacher perspective challenges and barriers presented themselves in the relationship and support from school district superintendents and site coordinators, poor planning and implementation of GNM, and in teacher quality.

Challenges and barriers on the student level. Taking on an educational program in concert with regular daily life activities proved to be confounding to some student-participants. If a family member was ill, school stopped. It was difficult for some to circumvent work schedules to fit in studying when they were tired. Some student-participants had to adjust their attitudes to get back into the swing of going to school. Those who had Internet access problems and lacked hardware learned to find access and computers elsewhere, such as the local library, high school, or community center. The student-participants found they could not use these life issues as excuses for incomplete work and they had to develop organizational and time management skills. These were valuable lessons in problem solving which could be transferred to other parts of the student-participants' lives.

Education in the broad sense of the word is not just about learning academics but also about learning life skills. Be able to adjust to adversity is a life skill and when mastered personal growth occurs.

Contrary to the literature on the importance of creating online communities, those participating in this study did not want nor see the importance of creating an online community. Possibly their rejection of online community was the fact that they had a difficult time socially in their traditional high school experiences. Their lack of embracing online community may also be attributed to the fact that they were busy adults for the most part and just wanted to get their diploma requirements done. Did the lack of an online community make a difference in their satisfaction level of their GNM educational experience, their retention of learned content, or their growth as a learner or in negotiating a social milieu? Good questions for another study.

The academic skills such as learning to study efficiently are survival skills in school at any level. The upgrading of academic skills and learner readiness added growth to those student-participants who persisted to course completion. Those who struggled with reading difficulties and comprehension made progress. Did the lessons they learned instill a new love of learning in them? Many experienced renewed self-esteem and self-confidence earning better grades than in traditional high school. Some moved on to post-secondary education and some entered careers they had chosen. The fact that many of the student-participants clearly wanted a high school diploma over a GED and wanted improved quality of life was a statement that expressed value in education. GNM was more than an academic program but a personal growth program as well.

Challenges and barriers at the administrative level. The administrators and instructors believed in the potential success of the GNM program. There was discussion among them that the program was not planned or implemented well and was rushed into implementation. The original plan called for a two year funding base, but by the time the program was implemented the funding had been cut to one year. The program was initiated in August 2010; the funding stopped in March of 2011, and the program was closed. Students who were in courses were allowed to complete them through the summer of 2011. A few enrollments were allowed in the fall of 2011 by special permission.

From the perspective of the teachers and administrators they saw a good program than needed some structural work. Since GNM was a state-wide program, there must be buy-in from the educators throughout the state. Resources, whether personnel or collateral resources, must be engaged at high levels for the benefit of the dropout students or they are no better off than before the program opened.

GNM must have its own identity on two levels. At the implementation of the GNM program it belonged to both the Public Education Department and the Higher Education Department (HED). The program was subject to supervision and budgets by both entities. Administratively, this sets up the program to be pushed and pulled just like the students. It would be advised that GNM be a standalone entity and have its own identity subject to supervision by the Secretary of Education for the state. On the student level, the program was supposed to be open for those students who needed only a few credits to graduate. Instead all students, even those with one or two high school credits, were allowed to enroll. This may have overloaded the teachers and students, especially those students with special needs, did not get the attention they deserved. In conjunction, dropout students are a special

population of student just as the special needs student. Teachers who have background and understanding of dropout students and their culture were those to staff the teaching positions at GNM.

The challenges and barriers to course completion exist at both the student level and at the administrative level. This was not uncommon to new programs. With time and attention to rectify or modify these challenges and barriers, GNM could continue to be an outstanding program for dropout students and recognized nationally.

Additional Findings

There were a number of additional findings that emerged as the data was analyzed overall. These findings were not related to the research questions or the interview questions.

Arrested development. The impact of dropping out of high school was an interruption in the normal educational development of these participants. Dropping out caused them to miss out, not only on content knowledge, but also in life skill knowledge such as problem solving, time management and organizational skills or workplace skills. The impact of the event of dropping out of school was given little or no thought by the student or family in regards to the future of the student-participant. The impact was evidenced by no job or a low paying job. Low skills and quality of life issues were daily struggles for many. Over time the damage done by dropping out revealed itself. These deficits were apparent when the student-participants began their GNM studies. One example of this is the fact that the participants appeared to be computer savvy. They could browse the Internet, use email and Skype, and shop online. However, when it came to academic writing, the skills many demonstrated was that of text mail writing. They lacked the formal writing skills needed to complete academic coursework. Another example comes from student-participants who

have a difficult time finding and keeping a job. According to the student-participants, many of the jobs they do have are low skill level positions.

Is the window of development still open? Can the dropout student return to high school and close the gap of academic knowledge and life skill knowledge? It is a known that many high school dropouts end up in criminal activity and prison. For some, it is survival of the fittest. The GNM teachers reported many students who enrolled never completed an assignment and ultimately dropped out of this program. Where will they end up?

For many dropout students filling the gap may be possible. Their lives have moved on and they have gained life experiences in a different way. Many have marriages and families to care about along with jobs, even if they are low paying jobs. The life skill they have learned was how to survive without a diploma.

The dropout student appears to be forever doomed without a diploma. Any special programs to help them advance themselves are slowly going away, GNM as an example. In the Albuquerque Journal on April 3, 2012 an article appeared that read *Cutbacks to Affect Older Students*. The article reports that students without a diploma have been able to take an “ability to benefit” test to see if they are college ready. If they are, they qualify for federal funds to help them pay for a post-secondary education. This program will end on July 1, 2012, most likely because the cost was overwhelming considering the number of students without a diploma. One spokesperson was quoted saying that even if the students passed the test, they were still below college readiness. If this student was not college ready, would it take a longer time to fill the gap of knowledge? Was there a widening gap of knowledge the longer the dropout stays out of school? Without this funding many students, especially the older worker who was looking for retraining, a diploma, or job change, would not be able to

begin or continue their education. As a society, the answers will only be found if the steps are taken to develop programs to recover the dropout.

Multi-generational clientele: Entitlement and accountability. The student-participants in this study ranged in age from 18 to 47. They demonstrated a wide range of educational backgrounds. It may be that they came back to school with the attitudes and behaviors that they remembered school to be in their day. For the over 30 years old participants, they approached learning with a “help me” attitude. The under 30 years old participants demonstrated an attitude of entitlement, wanting to rush through class work and questioning “why” they had to do certain tasks in certain ways. Work ethic showed through; many wanted their diploma handed to them without having to work for it. In the two groups there were also vast differences in computer abilities. For the over 30 group, many were not technologically astute and needed extra instruction to navigate the website, find links, send emails, and post homework. For the under 30 group, it was easier for them to find their way around the course websites, but a number of them were not as technologically savvy as the teachers thought them to be.

The challenge for a program like GNM is to understand each student by understanding the educational background they bring and the generational changes that have occurred over time. It may come down to differentiated education for different ages which may encompass did learning needs for each generation. It would be important then for educators to understand the generational differences in their students in relationship to the educator’s age and educational teaching and learning background. For the younger students social media and its immediacy to information was quite different than the older student who did not have calculators or computers in the classroom.

Program accountability: School failing students. The student-participants dropped out of high school because their schools were not meeting their needs either academically or personally. The closing of the GNM program was a blow to these student-participants.

Due to the limited time the GNM program was available to them, many felt rushed and either did not complete courses or failed courses. They were distraught, angry, and frustrated when notified the GNM program was ending when they had barely gotten started. This time *they* were being dropped and it was not their choice to leave school. Despite their feelings, the participants were able to find the good, that is, the success factors in the program. I believe their ability to speak well of the program, despite the rug being pulled out from under them, speaks to the success of this program. At this writing, the GNM program has ended.

Implications

The interviews with participants, instructors, and administrators resulted in numerous positive comments which were factors of success for the GNM program. These factors of success should be reinforced and continued. However, comments from all three groups also resulted in factors that either could be success factors or factors that were not currently present in the program which could lead to further educational success for GNM students. Implications for students, instructors, and administrators are presented as follows.

Students. Implications for students revolve around three areas: the program, learning, and organization/time management. As evidenced in the interviews, facility with their own learning processes and a willingness to expand their organizational skills were key components to successful course completion.

Instructors. Implications for instructors centered on communication, differentiated instruction, and supporting students in an online environment. A conclusion of the research was that established educational practices based on traditional whole group instruction models must be modified to support the online asynchronous environment. Just as differentiated instruction is important in a traditional classroom, it is just as important in an online program. The asynchronous nature of the GNM program allows teachers that latitude since the online program is a one to one, student to teacher ratio. Those students who can be accelerated will move through the courses faster while those students, who may have special education needs, may move through courses at a slower tempo. The important goal is to master the learning.

Administrators. Implications for administrators include four key factors for success: staffing, curriculum, facilities, and defining student demographics. This last factor which determines the types and needs of students admitted to GNM directs decisions about staff, curriculum, and hard and cyber facilities.

Table 14 is a summary of the major implications for students, teachers, and instructors. Listed with the major findings is a bulleted list of minor implications.

Table 14. Summary: Implications for students, instructors, and administrators

Students	
<p>Students must understand the special characteristics and demands of online learning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Role and responsibility of the student in online learning. ✓ Determine a reasonable number of courses to take concurrently. ✓ Keep in touch with the instructor regarding life situations that may deter academic efforts. <p>Understand how to learn.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Know learning style. ✓ Ask for help and seek out resources. ✓ Take constructive criticism constructively. ✓ Be encouraged by success. ✓ Be tenacious about learning. ✓ Advocate for yourself. <p>Students must hone organizational and time management skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Have reachable goals in mind. ✓ Determine the best study method and academic schedule for student. ✓ Log in each day to check progress. ✓ Complete each assignment. ✓ Meet deadlines. ✓ Know that there may be a delay for teacher responses online or by email. 	<p>“I thought it would be like a class environment, like just at a regular time every day.” Adrian</p> <p>“Like I’ve taken Rosetta Stone like to learn like a language, but I thought it was gonna be like that, like you just click in a box and press ‘next.’” Kelly</p> <p>“I didn’t know what to expect.” Maria</p> <p>“I was scared to death of just about everything; I didn’t know what to expect.” Rebecca</p> <p>“I don’t think that they thought that they were actually going to have to work for [a diploma].” Teacher</p> <p>“They don’t know how to prioritize; they don’t know how to set up time schedules.” Teacher</p> <p>“[The pacing guide] tells what they need to do in which week and that they need to use that to organize themselves. It’s that simple, and I think those are some of the skills though that were never learned in the first place that maybe could have helped them out when they were the traditional student, so organizational skills for sure.” Administrator</p>

Table 14 Continued

Instructors	
<p>Teachers must communicate with students by reaching out through emails, telephone, online office hours and tutoring, and meeting face-to-face when possible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ask students to self-reflect. ✓ Develop social presence and low transactional distance. ✓ Meet face-to-face if possible ✓ Express patience and encouragement to students. ✓ Return work with comments to help improve skills and support motivation. ✓ Work with site-coordinators and tutors to assess progress. 	<p>“Our teachers train to at three days you do this, and then a week you do this, and you send another message, and you text. And, you just remind them that you’re still here, and you’re still <i>expecting</i> (original) them to finish.” Administrator</p> <p>“We offered live brick and mortar tutoring sessions that they could come to here.” Teacher</p> <p>“There’s a workroom downstairs...I’m gonna man the computer lab...Physically come in, I’ll help you with your class.” Teacher</p>
<p>Differentiate learning according to the needs of this special population of students using a mixture of adolescent and adult learning principles to bridge learning gaps.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Understand pedagogy and androgogy. ✓ Understand the special nature and characteristics of the dropout student. ✓ Load content according to student background. ✓ Help students with organizational skills. ✓ Help students adjust to using a computer as a tool for learning. 	<p>“You could communicate with the instructor anytime you want, and they leave their phone numbers, emails and stuff like that. They’re always there to help you, and that’s a good thing.” Adrian</p> <p>“She was very good and would call me right back.” Rosanne</p> <p>“You have direct contact with the teachers with the teachers and you can talk with them through email.” Alicia</p>

Table 14 Continued

<p>Support the online environment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Be reflective about own online teaching. ✓ Intervene when students have technology problems. ✓ Help student understand the special characteristics of online learning. ✓ Work through the curriculum to make sure links are active, instructions are clear, and content is appropriate for the learner. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Be flexible with the pacing guide and deadlines. ✓ Monitor the online community. ✓ Have online meetings. ✓ Respond to emails and telephone calls in a timely manner. 	<p>“This GNM was much different than just teaching a regular, online course because they were spread out I their abilities.” Teacher</p> <p>“Although they think they’re adults, they look like adults, their birthday is an adult birthday, cognitively they’re still at a 16-year-old level.” Teacher</p> <p>“We have 26, 27-year-old students thought who are not as fluent with their technology as we would expect them to be...It was so different dealing with this 27-year-old who was acting like a 15-year-old but then recognizing, well, that’s where they are right now in their educational experience.” Administrator</p>
<p>Administrators</p>	
<p>Administrators must create a program identity by defining who the GNM program serves.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Define dropout by the number of hours required to complete the diploma and if the student is correctly placed in GNM. ✓ Clearly define who owns the dropout student. ✓ Develop a placement screening tool. ✓ Develop positive working relationships statewide. <p>Continue to develop and modify the infrastructure of the GNM program in the areas of hiring, support, training, curriculum, and expressing the vision of GNM to gain buy-in from all educators state-wide.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Hire teachers who understand the profile of a dropout student. ✓ Hire a GNM counselor. ✓ Improve communication between site-coordinators, counselors, and tutors. 	<p>“The most successful ones were gonna be the ones that were seniors and needed one or two credits to graduate. Those were the ones that you could’ve really helped, but we were getting kids that dropped out in their freshman year. The needed a whole high school course.” Teacher</p> <p>“I think that one of those things that could have been done better with the GNM program is flushing out some of those candidates who don’t have the readiness to be self-directive learners...We just kind of opened the flood gates and let anybody in there.” Teacher</p> <p>“There were a few site coordinators out there that would help them...but there were very few of those.” Teacher</p>

Table 14 Continued

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Train site coordinators, teachers, and counselors to understand the dropout student and develop student motivation. ✓ Train site coordinators and counselors to consider life circumstances when assigning course load. ✓ Implement face-to-face orientation to teach students about the demands of online learning and how to use the computer to navigate each site. <p>Allow teachers to create and differentiate curriculum to needs of students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Protect the rigor and standards of the curriculum. ✓ Use the NMSBA, ACT or SAT to determine if curriculum standards are met. ✓ Improve program infrastructure. ✓ Develop strong learning centers for tutoring and assessment across the state. ✓ Improve Internet, computer, and printer access across the state especially in rural areas. ✓ Create an online library. 	<p>“The courses are already made... We found a lot of flaws in how they were developed.” Teacher</p> <p>“In online, it’s the support mechanism that surrounds it...I think the number one in this state, being that we have such rural areas, access to broadband, access to a computer lab, is something that might not be unique to New Mexico, but we have a very rural and very poor state.” Teacher</p> <p>”You have to have people who understand this population and are willing to work with them... You want great instructors, but you also want a great instructor who understands what they’re walking into.” Teacher</p> <p>“The GNM program in general was not well received by the districts. It was very forced...It left a bad taste in their mouth...[The districts] felt like the funding shoulda gone to them...Some of them didn’t wanna participate and some did...in a forced fashion.” Administrator</p>
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Role of the Researcher

I entered this research project with a background of 27 years in public and private education. I have held positions as teacher, counselor, and administrator. I have worked with regular education students and gifted students. My biases formed my view of students as achievers in middle class to affluent schools supporting the needs of all students. Dropout students were not part of my career experience. My personal experience coupled with

stereotypical thoughts of dropouts as low achieving, uncaring students could bias my interpretation of the dropout student. I discovered something different.

As I talked with the student-participants I was amazed at the variety of circumstances described. One student-participant shared that he had no friends, was stuck at home with his parents because he did not have a car, and could not get to a school. Another student-participant revealed that she was a wife and mom, whose husband had a college degree and she wanted to contribute to the family. She was working the evening shift in a low paying job which kept her from spending time with her children. These were wonderful people who had courage to come forward and share some of the hardest times of their lives with me. Did they do it for the \$25.00? I will never know but I wondered how embarrassing sharing their story was for them. For all the reasons they dropped out, every student-participant wanted to better themselves and make a difference in their lives and the lives of their family members. Their stories evoked sadness and empathy from me and a feeling that I personally wanted to help them. There are people in New Mexico who are truly stuck in life because of a decision they made years ago. My biases and perceptions have changed because of this study.

The gifts qualitative research gives the researcher is the opportunity to learn and change. It places the researcher in the position of active learner to seek information from interviewees and understand their realities. If qualitative researchers keep an open mind, the realities of the interviewees emerge and new interpretations and appreciations can be formed in the researcher. I saw a different set of people in a life situation I was not familiar with but sought to understand. As a qualitative researcher I have a new understanding of dropouts and the struggles the dropout population faces daily. I continue to believe that all students in traditional school deserve the best chance for an education. In my role of the active learner

researcher I know that dropouts are very much caring people who did not receive the caring interventions while in high school that I know. They are people with intellectual ability that is many times coupled with a low fund of knowledge that needs to be filled. They want to improve their life situations, be positive role models for their children and families, and contribute to society in productive ways. Education has new meaning for them and they can overcome many of their deficits and develop the cognitive, social, and technology skills needed to move on in life and the GNM program was that chance. Their stories evoked empathy and stirred my heart to want to help each one. How could I not be changed after interacting with these adult dropouts and listening to their stories!

Recommendations for Future Research

Because this research is a qualitative study, the results are grounded in the stories of 28 participants in the GNM program. The GNM program is a specifically defined program for dropouts and this study was specifically defined for dropout students. However, further research is indicated to continue understanding the adult dropout in a high school online program. Continuing this study with a design revision to add a second interview with the student-participants is warranted. Each story the student-participants shared indicated a need for further probing and deeper understanding about their particular situation regarding their dropout experience, the impact on their life, and their experience in the GNM program. For instance, deeper questioning about the student-participants relationships with their high school teachers, counselors, and administrators is in order. Adding questions about their parents' views and attitudes about education, their parents understanding of their child dropping out of high school, and their support or non-support for this event to further understanding of their life situations is needed.

Second, many students enrolled in GNM but subsequently dropped out, some without turning in one assignment. Why? The teachers believed it was because the students thought a diploma would be handed to them without any work on their part. If another program like GNM were to emerge, how do the program administrators keep students in the program? Using a qualitative method, future research could engage those students who enrolled and dropped out and those who enrolled in the program and remained in the GNM program to determine the reasons for enrollment and subsequent non-engagement. Interview questions could center on the students' perceptions of the program, what they thought they would have to do, and what they would get out of the program. It would be important to discuss learning styles and learner characteristics to determine if the student is ready for online education in addition to what their high school experiences taught them.

A third potential research project is to explore how learning takes place in the mind of a dropout. How do teaching practices affect students of different age ranges? The participants in the GNM program are adults, but they are academically stuck in high school. Further research is indicated to determine if this target group of students learns best through the principles of adolescent learning (pedagogy) or the principles of adult learning (andragogy). Some participants had work and life experiences that helped them develop a greater sense of maturity than others. The participants in this research are multi-generational. This may be a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative inquiry, learning style inventories as well as a question protocol.

A fourth suggestion for future research is for teachers and online designers to determine the needs of the gifted education, regular education, and special needs dropout students in order to differentiate courses for each group of students. The course work in the

GNM program was a one-size-fits all curriculum. What special needs should be incorporated into a curriculum for gifted students? Do those students who have special needs and reading deficiencies require a differentiated approach to learning in an online environment as compared to the student without special needs and reading deficiencies? How can the online course be differentiated to accommodate the gifted and special needs students without giving up rigor and satisfy course standards? How do the students who complete diplomas in the GNM program score on high school exit tests or ACT or SAT exams for college entrance? Implementing a qualitative method, questioning both special needs students and instructional designers may help develop curriculum that meets the needs of all students.

Several dropout students in this study indicated their parents did not complete high school and did not protest or intervene in their dropping out of school behaviors. Can a better understanding of the parental value of education help to understand the dropout and break the dropout cycle? A fifth research recommendation is a qualitative method study interviewing parents of dropouts to further the understanding of dropping out of school from a family environment perspective. Family attitudes and behaviors have influence on the student who is having difficulty in school or is not engaged in school.

A sixth recommendation for further study begins with the question: Did the high school diploma completing student get a better job or a promotion? Have the children of dropouts who earned a diploma through the GNM program graduated from high school or, at a minimum, have they remained in school? Has the value of education been demonstrated to children of dropouts who subsequently earned a diploma? Many participants state they desire a high school diploma to obtain better jobs or vie for promotions in the careers they hold. Some participants state they want to be good role models for their children. A follow

up study or longitudinal study of the impact of getting a diploma on jobs, promotions, and the influence the diploma had on child rearing indicates the impact of earning a high school diploma. This study may use a blend of quantitative survey results and qualitative follow up in a two step method.

The seventh suggestion for future research involves the concept of online communities. The student-participants were not in favor of forming online communities and found it difficult to engage in peer review in an asynchronous environment with starting and ending course times differing for every student. This finding flies in the face of current literature supporting the creation of an online community as essential for student satisfaction. Using a mixed methods approach, this concept of online communities may be explored from the synchronous and asynchronous environments, reviewing grades earned and course satisfaction surveys from both environments, with interview comments from students and teachers in both environments addressing the need for and importance of online communities.

An eighth recommendation for future research is to reduce the dropout rate by exploring intervention methods in all levels of schools since the literature suggests teachers can predict which students drop out as early as third grade. How do the schools predict dropouts? What do the schools do to prevent dropouts? How do teachers and counselors teach and foster resiliency and persistence in their classrooms? A mixed method of study to review school protocols, interview teachers and counselors regarding their understanding of what the dropout student needs, interviewing potential dropout students about their needs and interventions that help them become resilient to dropping out, and observing teachers in the

classroom and how they interact with potential drop out students may prove useful for future teacher training to reduce the dropout rate.

Significance

The uniqueness of this research was the bridging of adult high school dropout students with an asynchronous online high school curriculum and finding the factors of success that relate to course completion. These findings add to the literature about this special population of adult dropout students returning to high school and have special significance for students, instructional designers, and policy makers.

Significance for students. Adult high school dropout students are an underserved population. The GNM program was the opportunity many adult dropout students were seeking for high school diploma completion. The asynchronous structure of the GNM program allowed these dropout students who were now adults with adult responsibilities the opportunity to return to school to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. The flexibility of the asynchronous online environment allowed them to work around employment schedules, child care needs, and transportation needs.

The GNM program allowed them to build on the high school credits they already had. The students had the vision of being able to complete something they started years ago. Self-esteem and academic confidence was rebuilt and renewed for many of the student-participants. The struggles of their high schools years diminished and education once again was seen as a positive asset in their lives. They now had the opportunity to get out of the rut of low wages without career prospects, contribute to their families and society, and feel fulfilled as a human being like those in their academic cohort.

The closing of the GNM program was devastating to many of the student-participants. A chance gained was now a chance lost. Tommy shared his thoughts on the value of the program: “It was a marvelous program and I can’t believe that they have cut funding for it because this so something that could help so many adults that never got their diploma.” Mary added support to Tommy’s comments. “This program is giving a lot of people the opportunity that we wouldn’t have before. I think we need to do something to get it back if there’s any way possible.” When Brianna was asked about the importance of the GNM program for her and the closing of the program she said” “I am not happy at all. I was gonna cry, 'cause they were like, ‘Oh, it’s gonna come back in January—OK, in May—OK never coming back!’ Oh, I was so heartbroken.”

Rosanne was working toward her diploma for a promotion. When she heard that GNM was closing, she became an activist for GNM.

I got some numbers and I called and I called, and I wrote letters to Susanna [Martinez]. I wrote her letters, and I told her I’m—told her who I was, I told her my age, I told her I raised three children, I told her everything. I told her, “You took away a program that was so critical to my life.” I mean critical. This could have meant everything to me. So, I wrote letters; I did. I did everything.

Significance for teachers and administrators. For teachers and administrators, the importance of caring and supporting students is emphasized in the stories of the dropouts. The literature informs educators that dropping out of school begins as early as third grade. It is important for the field of education to create and implement solutions to identify those students at risk for dropping out whether those interventions are aimed at the student and/or at the parents of the student. It is important also for the post-secondary schools of education to train pre-service teachers to look for the signs of dropping out in their future students and understand the importance of student engagement in school and how to foster this in their

classrooms. Finding and training teachers and administrators who are empathetic to all students and the backgrounds their students come from should be a wake-up call to change schools to meet the needs of all students.

Significance for instructional designers. The results of this study indicated that a number of the students had demonstrated learning disabilities particularly in reading and reading comprehension. Other students who had been out of school for a number of years were found to be challenged by the high reading levels of the instructional materials. Still others had troubles navigating the course websites, finding and accessing links, and posting assignments. It is important for instructional designers to keep in mind the learning needs of all students with differing background and learning needs. Reading levels of instructional materials, graphics, and ease of navigation on the website were items mentioned by students in this research. These items are all challenges for instructional designers to take into account when designing an online course.

Many disabled students are taking online classes to avoid the inconvenience of getting around a campus. Their impairments may be visual, hearing, cognitive, or physical. The field of online instructional design must be ready to accommodate these students and strive to meet their educational potential with special or supplemental course models so that the impaired student may engage in the same learning as others.

The findings of this research were clear that the student-participants had open communication and tutoring opportunities with the teachers. The challenge for an instructional designer for an asynchronous class was to create the online community among the students. The importance of this lies in the fact that many jobs and careers rely on their employees working together as teams. In the field of education, working together in a team

fosters collaboration and constructivist learning as well as learning to get along as team members.

The dropout student-participants in this study were found to be deficit in a number of areas. However, because they are adults, they have a number of life experiences to draw from to enhance their learning. It will be important for instructional designers to remember that this group of students is diverse in learning styles, past school experiences, and in generational characteristics. With this in mind it will be important to understand adult learning theory as course modules are designed.

With these thoughts in mind, it is critical for instructional designers to differentiate design features into course modules to that the many take advantage of the technology at hand.

Significance for policy makers. The State of New Mexico ranks 48th in the nation for academic achievement. High school dropout rates were declared unacceptable and exposed local and national crises. Those who dropped out were impacted individually, but there was also a state and national impact. Many dropouts added little or nothing to the tax revenue base and may rely heavily on social welfare systems draining state and national budgets. The importance for legislative policy makers was to weight these factors: the economic development factors of the state and the toll dropouts made on state and national budgets versus the education budget required to implement dropout prevention and credit recovery programs such as GNM. In the field of education, there may need to be programs running in parallel--one at the schools' level and one for the dropout students--to reduce dropout numbers. It is important for the legislative and community leaders on all sides of the issue to acknowledge the long term advantages to the tax revenue base by supporting

increased educational levels of many New Mexicans and their consequent economic advancement.

One of the interviewee administrators appealed to the state legislators and community business leaders to support this particular group of students.

That improves our revenue base. These are people who can contribute to society, and the more education they have and the better jobs they find and the less, the fewer people we have living without government assistance the better off we are. So, why wouldn't it be everybody's mission to understand that education is the way to improve yourself...that's just the bottom line. If we don't recognize that and the give the avenue for it, because you didn't do it when you were 18, well, you're now forever a dropout? You are never going to be able to be educated again? I just don't understand that mentality from any angle.

It is important that policy makers formulate strategies to attack the diploma recovery process in New Mexico and financially support it. The study demonstrated that the GNM program was a tremendous step forward for dropout students in New Mexico. The student-participants themselves voiced their strong support for this program. The importance of GNM and the anger regarding the closure of the program were summed up by Sally.

If I was looking for the easy way out, I wouldn't spend a year trying to get my diploma, but my diploma is important to me. I'm not trying to take the easy way out. I'm willing to do the work...You know, I had As in all of my classes. At least I can say it wasn't me and that's what I put into that letter to the governor with that. The government made this decision for me. It wasn't me this time that gave up, like the first time.

For a short time, they saw the light at the end of the tunnel that gave them hope to achieve their dreams and goals for better quality of life. That light has now been extinguished.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Students

Date: _____

Interviewee

Name: _____ Pseudonym _____

Demographics

Gender: male female Age: _____

Dropout Background

1. What are the reasons you dropped out of high school?
2. At what grade level did you drop out?
3. Have you enrolled in any other alternative high school programs, such as the GED program, a virtual school, Job Corps, etc. after you dropped out of high school? What were your reasons for doing so?
4. What obstacles have you faced since you dropped out of high school? For example, family, jobs, self-esteem, self-confidence, friendships, etc?
5. What delayed you from returning to high school as you knew it to complete your high school diploma?

Motivation

6. How many courses do you have to complete to earn your diploma?
7. Describe the “aha” moment when you realized you had to finish your high school diploma? What motivated you to return to high school classes to earn your high school diploma?
8. What motivated you to take classes online, at a distance?
10. What obstacles do you face now in completing a class or classes to finish your course work for a diploma? What is the hardest obstacle for you to overcome in taking an online course? How are you dealing with this obstacle?
11. What kind of support do you need to complete courses online to earn your diploma? What is the hardest thing about returning to school and online classes?

12. How motivated are you to take another course? What needs to happen to keep you motivated?

Online Readiness

13. Where do you have access to your computer, the Internet, word processing programs?

14. What kinds of things do you do with the computer? Games, Skype, Email, Surf, word processing, etc?

15. What attracted you to the online Graduate New Mexico program?

16. Have you taken online courses before the Graduate New Mexico program? Before you started the Graduate New Mexico program, what did you think an online course would be like compared to a course in a traditional classroom? What is your experience?

17. What is your view of online classes now? Is it what you thought an online class would be? Is it easier or harder than traditional classroom courses?

18. What will you do or are you doing when things get tough and you don't feel like doing your course work? What gets in the way? How will you overcome this obstacle?

19. Will you continue in this program? What are your reasons for continuing or not continuing?

Success Factors

20. What factors are helping you be successful in this program? What factors in the online environment of this program are helping you complete a course?

21. What are your goals educationally? What are your ideas of success? What are your dreams for the future? What do you think will make you successful?

22. How is the Graduate New Mexico program helping you to be successful and reach your short term (earning a diploma) and long term goals?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Instructors and Administrators

Date: _____

Interviewee

Name: _____ Pseudonym _____

Demographics

Years of teaching: _____

Years of teaching online: _____

Success Factors

1. What are your perceptions about dropout students taking online classes?
2. What are your experiences with high school dropout students?
3. What obstacles do you see dropout students having in online classes? What educational obstacles do you see dropout students having in classes?
4. How do you see your Graduate New Mexico students overcoming online obstacles? How do you see your Graduate New Mexico students overcoming educational obstacles?
5. Your students are adults, over 18 years old, taking high school classes. How would you describe their motivation and enthusiasm to complete your course? Is motivation greater for students that have a few courses to take to finish their diploma as opposed to those students who have a lot of classes to take?
6. Describe your students' readiness for an online course. How ready are your students to take an online course?
7. How did your students anticipate the rigors of an online course vs. the course in a traditional classroom? What is the difference between an online course and a traditional course in the eyes of the student? How are they coping?
8. In your view, what readiness skills prior to the course or supports during the course do you see your students needing to be successful in your class?
9. What factors in the online environment are helping your students complete a course?
10. What factors are there that you recognize that meet the needs of your students to help them complete a course?

11. What factors have the students had to acquire that they did not have in their high school experience of completing a course? What difference are you seeing in your students in the online environment that was not present in their high school experience?
12. What do you see as the strengths of the Graduate New Mexico program for returning high school dropouts who are adults? For example, online environment, instructional design, relationship with student, etc?
13. What do you see as the weaknesses of the Graduate New Mexico program for returning high school dropouts who are adults? For example, online environment, instructional design, relationship with student, etc.?

Appendix C: Consent to Participate-Students

The University of New Mexico Main Campus IRB

Consent to Participate in Research - Students

Factors that determine success in online programs for returning high school dropouts.

Introduction

You are being asked to participate in a research study that is being done by Barbara Rothweiler, a doctoral student, who is the Principal Investigator and the University of New Mexico, from the Department of Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology. This research is studying the experiences of high school drop outs enrolled in the Graduate New Mexico program.

There are numerous research studies citing why students drop out of high school. With the advent of virtual schools, many students are continuing their high school education using online courses. Some students use online courses to complete their high school diploma on a regular schedule. Others use online courses for credit recovery. Recently there is emerging research on high school drop out students who are now adults returning to school to complete their high school diploma. In New Mexico, the Graduate New Mexico program is supported by Gov. Bill Richardson. His goal is to attract 10,000 New Mexico high school dropouts back to school, many through online course work, to improve the educational level of the residents of the state. It is important to gather information from newly enrolled students in the Graduate New Mexico program to understand the student's motivations, experience in returning to school, and factors that determine success so that the program can improve and continue to attract new students to complete their high school education.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are enrolled in the Graduate New Mexico program. Up to 14 people will take part in this study at the University of New Mexico. Students and instructors statewide will be asked to join the study since Graduate New Mexico serves students all over New Mexico.

This form will explain the research study, and will also explain the possible risks as well as the possible benefits to you. We encourage you to talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. If you have any questions, please ask one of the study investigators.

What will happen if I decide to participate?

If you agree to participate, the following things will happen:

- * You will be asked to participate in an individual interview, which will last about 2 hours. You will be asked to relate your experiences that led you to drop out of high school, to talk about your reasons for wanting to complete your high school diploma, the obstacles you may face since you dropped out and in the present, and your experiences taking online courses while enrolled in the Graduate New Mexico program. You will be asked to share your motivations and ideas of success since you dropped out of high school.
- * You must sign this consent form to participate in this study.
- * The interview will be recorded.
- * Soon after the interview, the recording will be transcribed into text for the researcher to analyze.
- * Your name will be replaced by a pseudonym (false name) in the text to protect your privacy.
- * You will be asked to participate in a follow up interview, which will last about 2 hours, at a later time when you finish your course,.
- * The follow up interview will be recorded and transcribed into text for analysis by the researcher.
- * A final report will be written without using your name, only your pseudonym. The information in the report will be shared with IDEAL-NM but names will not be used, only pseudonyms.

How long will I be in this study?

Participation in this study will take a total of about 4 hours over a period of 2 semesters or while you are enrolled in a Graduate New Mexico course. Each interview will be no longer than 2 hours.

What are the risks of being in this study?

- Risks are minimal. The IDEAL-NM administrators and your instructor(s) will not know that you are participating in this study. Family members, employers, or anyone else will not know that you are participating in this study.
- There are risks of stress, emotional distress, inconvenience and possible loss of privacy and confidentiality associated with participating in a research study.

For more information about risks, ask one of the study investigators.

What are the benefits to being in this study?

The benefit of being in this study is that input from you and your life experiences are important to help this program and others like you who would like to complete coursework for a high school diploma. Your information and ideas will help improve the Graduate New Mexico program so that obstacles may be eliminated and instruction improved. Your input is important because it will help more students to enroll and successfully earn their high school diploma.

What other choices do I have if I do not want to be in this study?

The choice to participate in this study is solely voluntary. You do not have to participate in the study. If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty or further action.

How will my information be kept confidential?

We will take measures to protect your privacy and the security of all your personal information, but we cannot guarantee confidentiality of all study data.

Information contained in your study records is used by Barbara Rothweiler, the primary researcher. The University of New Mexico IRB that oversees human subject research, and Barbara Rothweiler will be permitted to access your records. There may be times when we are required by law to share your information. However, your name will not be used in any published reports about this study.

The information you provide on the tape recorder will be stored for one year on the USB thumb drive and then deleted. The information you share will be protected by a pseudonym and password protected on the researcher's home computer.

What are the costs of taking part in this study?

There are no costs for taking part in this study except for your time and gas to arrive at an agreed upon location for the interview.

What will happen if I am injured or become sick because I took part in this study?

No commitment is made by the University of New Mexico (UNM) to provide free medical care or money for injuries to participants in this study. If you are injured or become sick as a result of this study, UNM will provide you with emergency treatment, at your cost. It is important for you to tell one of the study investigators immediately if you have been injured or become sick because of taking part in this study. If you have any questions about these

issues, or believe that you have been treated carelessly in the study, please contact the Main Campus IRB Office at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87131, (505) 272-1129 for more information.

Will I be paid for taking part in this study?

You will be given a gift card of \$15.00 for each interview at the end of the interview to compensate you for your time and effort.

How will I know if you learn something new that may change my mind about participating?

You will be informed of any significant new findings that become available during the course of the study, such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participating in the research or new alternatives to participation that might change your mind about participating.

Can I stop being in the study once I begin?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to choose not to participate or to withdraw your participation at any point in this study without affecting any services to which you are entitled.

I will withdraw you from the study if you drop the course you are enrolled in or there is any suggestion of harm to you, to me, or to anyone else.

Whom can I call with questions or complaints about this study?

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints at any time about the research study, Barbara Rothweiler , or his/her associates and/or Dr. Charlotte "Lani" Gunawardena, the responsible faculty member, will be glad to answer them at my telephone number 505-453-1714, anytime, or Dr. Gunawardena at 505-277-5046, Monday through Friday by phone. If you need to contact someone after business hours or on weekends, please call 505-453-1714 and ask for Barbara Rothweiler. If you would like to speak with someone other than the research team in regards to any complaints you have about the study, you may call the UNM IRB at (505) 272-1129.

Whom can I call with questions about my rights as a research subject?

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may call the UNM IRB at (505) 272-1129. The IRB is a group of people from UNM and the community who provide independent oversight of safety and ethical issues related to research involving human subjects. For more information, you may also access the IRB website at <http://hsc.unm.edu/som/research/HRRC/maincampusirbhome.shtml>.

Consent

You are making a decision whether to participate (or to have your child participate) in this study. Your signature below indicates that you read the information provided (or the information was read to you). By signing this consent form, you are not waiving any of your (your child's) legal rights as a research subject.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. By signing this consent form, I agree to participate in this study. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

Name of Adult Subject (print)	Signature of Adult Subject	Date

INVESTIGATOR SIGNATURE

I have explained the research to the subject or his/her legal representative and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Barbara M. Rothweiler _____

Name of Investigator/ Research Team Member (type or print)

(Signature of Investigator/ Research Team Member)	Date

Appendix D: Consent to Participate-Instructors/Administrators

The University of New Mexico Main Campus IRB

Consent to Participate in Research – Instructors/Administrator

Factors that determine success in online programs for returning high school dropouts.**Introduction**

You are being asked to participate in a research study that is being done by Barbara Rothweiler, a doctoral student, who is the Principal Investigator and the University of New Mexico, from the Department of Organizational Learning and Instructional Technology. This research is studying the experiences of high school drop outs enrolled in the Graduate New Mexico program.

There are numerous research studies citing why students drop out of high school. With the advent of virtual schools, many students are continuing their high school education using online courses. Some students use online courses to complete their high school diploma on a regular schedule. Others use online courses for credit recovery. Recently there is emerging research on high school drop out students who are now adults returning to school to complete their high school diploma. In New Mexico, the Graduate New Mexico program is supported by Gov. Bill Richardson. His goal is to attract 10,000 New Mexico high school dropouts back to school, many through online course work, to improve the educational level of the residents of the state. It is important to gather information from instructors in the Graduate New Mexico program to understand the teachers' perceptions regarding teaching dropouts returning to high school classes, the instructors' preparation and accommodations or modifications that have taken place during the instruction or in the next class.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an instructor in the Graduate New Mexico program. Up to 14 people will take part in this study at the University of New Mexico. Students and instructors statewide will be asked to join the study since Graduate New Mexico serves students all over New Mexico.

This form will explain the research study, and will also explain the possible risks as well as the possible benefits to you. We encourage you to talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. If you have any questions, please ask one of the study investigators.

What will happen if I decide to participate?

If you agree to participate, the following things will happen:

- * You will be asked to participate in an individual interview, which will last about 2 hours. You will be asked to relate your experiences and perceptions about teaching online courses to adult students returning to high school courses online and any. In addition you will be asked to talk about your preparation and accommodations or modifications you have had to make while instructing these students.
- * You must sign this consent form to participate in this study.
- * The interview will be recorded.
- * Soon after the interview, the recording will be transcribed into text for the researcher to analyze.
- * Your name will be replaced by a pseudonym (false name) in the text to protect your privacy.
- * You will be asked to participate in a follow up interview, which will last about 2 hours, at a later time when you finish your course,.
- * The follow up interview will be recorded and transcribed into text for analysis by the researcher.
- * A final report will be written without using your name, only your pseudonym. The information in the report will be shared with IDEAL-NM but names will not be used, only pseudonyms.

How long will I be in this study?

Participation in this study will take a total of 1 hours over a period of 2 interviews, each about 1/2 to 2 hours, during the semesters you are teaching a Graduate New Mexico course. Each interview will be no longer than 2 hours.

What are the risks of being in this study?

- Risks are minimal. The risk of harm is no more than you would encounter in everyday life. The IDEAL-NM administrators will not know that you are participating in this study. Family members, employers, or anyone else will not know that you are participating in this study.
- There are risks of stress, emotional distress, inconvenience and possible loss of privacy and confidentiality associated with participating in a research study.

For more information about risks, ask one of the study investigators.

What are the benefits to being in this study?

The benefit of being in this study is that inputs from you about your teaching experiences are important to help this program improve and the enrolled and future students successfully earn their high school diploma. Your information and ideas will help improve the Graduate New Mexico program so that obstacles may be eliminated and instruction improved.

What other choices do I have if I do not want to be in this study?

The choice to participate in this study is solely voluntary. You do not have to participate in the study. If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty or further action.

How will my information be kept confidential?

We will take measures to protect your privacy and the security of all your personal information, but we cannot guarantee confidentiality of all study data.

Information contained in your study records is used by Barbara Rothweiler, the primary researcher. The University of New Mexico IRB that oversees human subject research and Barbara Rothweiler will be permitted to access your records. There may be times when we are required by law to share your information. However, your name will not be used in any published reports about this study.

The information you provide on the tape recorder will be stored for one year on the USB thumb drive and then deleted. The information you share will be protected by a pseudonym and password protected on the researcher's home computer.

What are the costs of taking part in this study?

There are no costs for taking part in this study except for your time and gas to arrive at an agreed upon location for the interview.

What will happen if I am injured or become sick because I took part in this study?

No commitment is made by the University of New Mexico (UNM) to provide free medical care or money for injuries to participants in this study. If you are injured or become sick as a result of this study, UNM will provide you with emergency treatment, at your cost. It is important for you to tell one of the study investigators immediately if you have been injured or become sick because of taking part in this study. If you have any questions about these issues, or believe that you have been treated carelessly in the study, please contact the Main

Campus IRB Office at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87131, (505) 272-1129 for more information.

Will I be paid for taking part in this study?

You will be given a gift card of \$15.00 for each interview at the end of the interview to compensate you for your time and effort.

How will I know if you learn something new that may change my mind about participating?

You will be informed of any significant new findings that become available during the course of the study, such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participating in the research or new alternatives to participation that might change your mind about participating.

Can I stop being in the study once I begin?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to choose not to participate or to withdraw your participation at any point in this study without affecting any services to which you are entitled.

I will withdraw you from the study if you drop the course you are enrolled in or there is any suggestion of harm to you, to me, or to anyone else. **Whom can I call with questions or complaints about this study?**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints at any time about the research study, Barbara Rothweiler, or his/her associates and/or Dr. Charlotte N. Gunawardena, the responsible faculty member, will be glad to answer them at my telephone number 505-453-1714, anytime, or Dr. Gunawardena at 505-277-5046, Monday through Friday by phone. If you need to contact someone after business hours or on weekends, please call 505-453-1714 and ask for Barbara Rothweiler. If you would like to speak with someone other than the

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Consent

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INVESTIGATOR SIGNATURE

I have explained the research to the subject or his/her legal representative and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Barbara M. Rothweiler _____

Name of Investigator/ Research Team Member (type or print)

(Signature of Investigator/ Research Team Member)	Date

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