

DISSERTATION

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ENROLLED
IN HIGH RISK ONLINE COURSES: OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

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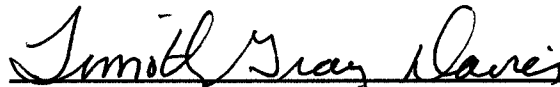
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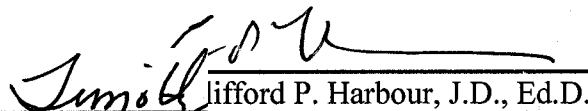
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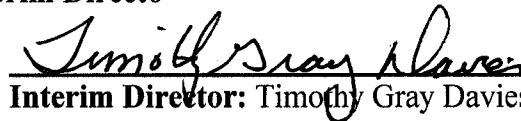
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ENROLLED IN HIGH RISK ONLINE COURSES: OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES

This qualitative study explored the lived experience of community college students who were enrolled in a high risk online course (HRC). This phenomenon was examined through data collection in personal interviews with 13 students enrolled in four online courses with high rates of withdrawal or failure during five semesters from spring 2005 through summer 2006.

Isolation, Academic Challenge, Ownership, and Acquiescence emerged as the four structural themes that framed the meaning and essence of the phenomenon, *Delicate Engagement*. The structure *Isolation* described the loneliness participants felt as they experienced the HRCs. *Isolation* reflected the struggle of participants to establish meaningful connections with the course, their instructor, and their classmates. The structure *Academic Challenge* articulated participants' overwhelming feelings as they faced the content and delivery of the HRCs. This structure was heard in the voices of participants as they described their unrealistic expectations for the course, the difficulty of the academic content, the complexity of the course structure, and their frustrations with technology. *Ownership* emerged as a structure that portrayed how participants prized their HRC and how they embraced the challenges and demands of the course. It marked their positive stance toward the HRC and the investment they made in their class.

Acquiescence emerged as the fourth structure that represented the slow and gradual ways that participants gave in to the loneliness and demands of the HRCs. It reflected the silent submissions and subtle compromises that led participants to relinquish *Ownership* of their HRCs. The four structures, *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* intermingled in positive and negative ways that led participants to survive or surrender to the HRC.

Four dimensions emerged to characterize the experience of participants: (a) empowered survivors, (b) compromised survivors, (c) reluctant surrenderers, and (d) misplaced surrenderers. The four ways in which participants survived or surrendered to their HRC experience formed the meaning and essence of the phenomenon, *Delicate Engagement*. It speaks to the vulnerable threads of academic and social involvement that permeated the experience of HRC participants. Connection within the HRCs was fragile, and it was too delicate to keep some participants engaged.

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DEDICATION

My mom and dad taught me to do what is necessary. My husband Michael helps me accomplish the possible. My sons Timothy and Thomas inspire me to do the impossible. Mom, Dad, Michael, Timothy, and Thomas, I dedicate this work to you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Experience on the Line: Jane's Story

My day started out as a typical one in the Student Success Office of my community college. As the morning progressed the increased flow of students into the office was particularly noticeable. When I looked at my academic calendar, I suddenly realized why. It was October 21, the last day of the semester to withdraw from classes without grade penalty. As I worked to assist students in the withdrawal process, the circumstances of one woman especially caught my attention. It was the second time I had seen her during the semester to discuss her course progress. A month earlier, I worked with her to withdraw from an online computer programming course. On this day, she requested a withdrawal from a second class, online advanced calculus. I was concerned. I asked if she would be willing to talk with me further about her online classes and her decision to withdraw. She appeared eager to share her experiences, and she accepted my invitation.

Surprising Opportunities

Jane, a pseudonym for my student, offered many insights to help me understand why she chose to enroll in online classes and the circumstances that led her to drop-out. She was in her third semester at the community college. She planned to complete her associate's degree in liberal arts at the end of the academic year. Jane came to the college immediately after high school. She chose community college because it was a convenient and affordable way to advance her education. She had an older sibling attending a state

university away from home. The high cost of university tuition, room, and board was a burden for her family. They could not afford to have two children enrolled in four year schools at the same time.

Jane enrolled in her first online course during her second semester at the community college. The online course offerings allowed her to expand her class schedule beyond the fixed place and time of campus classes. This flexibility allowed her to progress through her curriculum full-time while also working full-time to earn the money needed to pay for tuition, books, and other expenses. The combination of campus and online courses fit perfectly into her busy work schedule.

Jane chose world history for her first online class. She enjoyed reading and writing. She found the requirements of the online class an interesting and manageable challenge. In subsequent semesters, she continued to take classes both at the campus and online. She experienced success in several online history and English classes, and she was proud of the A and B grades she earned in these courses. Jane's early accomplishments gave her reason to believe she could also complete other online courses.

Unexpected Obstacles

Jane enrolled in online computer programming and advanced calculus classes during the fall semester of her second year. She did not anticipate the complex and difficult content of these courses. Within the first two weeks she realized she was unable to grasp the technical concepts of the computer programming class through the online instructional format. She had no prior background in the course, and she had difficulty understanding the material. As each day passed, she felt more lost and discouraged. She

soon recognized she was not able to complete the online computer programming class. Even though the course instructor was willing to meet with Jane at the campus to provide individual tutoring, she found the times offered for this extra help inconvenient. Jane was attracted to online courses because of the flexibility to study independently, without time and place restrictions. She said regular meetings at the campus with the professor reduced the benefits of taking classes online. Jane withdrew from the class after the third week.

As the fall semester continued, Jane experienced similar challenges with her online advanced calculus class. She completed the prerequisite math course in a prior semester at the campus. Even with the required background, she was unable to grasp the unfamiliar and complex concepts of advanced calculus. She acknowledged her instructor's offer to meet for individual tutoring at a campus of the college located 50 miles away. The time restrictions of the faculty member's schedule and the high cost of travel, involving both time and money, prohibited her from obtaining the extra help. Jane repeated to me her purpose for enrolling in online classes. She wanted the opportunity to learn independently at home, within her own time frame. As she explained her reasons for enrolling in online courses, I began to gain a better understanding of her expectations.

Lessons Learned

Jane articulated differences in her successful and unsuccessful experiences in online classes. When she succeeded she was comfortable with the expectations and requirements of the classes. She enjoyed the reading and writing required in her history and English classes. She found these subjects built on content and skills learned in high school. In addition, her academic strengths matched the content and the requirements of

these courses. This foundation allowed her to easily complete the course assignments and earn final grades of As and Bs.

Jane expected the same positive experiences when she enrolled in the computer programming and math classes. As she attempted these classes she underestimated the complexity of the new material. Even though she was competent in basic computer skills, she had difficulty understanding the intricate and unfamiliar material in the computer programming course. With no prior programming background, she was unable to navigate the course content independently. Similarly, she pointed out the material presented in the advanced calculus class was difficult for her to understand in an asynchronous learning environment. Jane explained, when she had questions, she had to write them out in an e-mail. She then had to wait several hours or sometimes a day or two for a response from the instructor. By the time she received a response, she had lost the continuity of thought, and she had to start at the beginning again. She became frustrated. Jane said she would have a better chance of completing such courses at the campus where the instructor was present to explain the content and available to provide immediate answers to her questions.

Jane learned some very valuable but costly lessons as she experienced both the opportunities and obstacles of online learning. We talked about the cost of withdrawing from her two online classes. The tuition for each course was over two hundred dollars. She withdrew from both classes after the tuition refund date, and she knew she would lose over four hundred dollars. She also knew the textbook return date had passed, representing an additional loss of over a hundred dollars. The total cost for Jane to withdraw from her online courses was over five hundred dollars, more than she earned in

a month at her job as a waitress at the local diner. Additionally, her decision to withdraw postponed her graduation by at least a semester, and it further delayed her goal to transfer her degree to a university. Jane said that had she known what to expect from her computer programming and advanced calculus classes, she may have made different choices and saved herself from costly lessons.

Promise of Access

After Jane left my office, I took a moment to reflect on our conversation. I thought of other students enrolled in online courses. Many selected this delivery option as a way to complete courses and degree programs as they struggled to accommodate demanding work and family schedules. Many students, who completed their courses with passing grades, were very satisfied with their online experience. They continued to enroll in additional online courses, some completing most of their degree requirements through this method of course delivery. Others like Jane dropped, withdrew, or failed their online courses.

As I continued to reflect, my questions increased. Knowing the loss Jane suffered, I wondered about the experiences of other students who did not complete their online courses. What were their expectations? Why did they withdraw or fail? I also thought about the many students who completed their online courses. What worked for them in this learning environment? How did they find success? I wondered how I might make a difference in their experience. If I knew more about the experiences of community college online learners, could I help students have a better understanding of the demands and requirements of online learning before they enroll, allowing them to avoid the

expensive lessons learned by students like Jane? My interest in finding answers to these questions led me to my research topic.

Vignette Summary

The growth in online learning during the past decade has provided new avenues of access for many community college students like Jane. Since online courses have been available at my college, I have heard from students who have experienced both the opportunities and the obstacles presented by these classes. Students have told me they appreciate the ability to participate in courses any time of the day or night. This flexibility allows them to commute, work, and tend to their families. I observed many students who completed online courses because it was the only way to continue their education. I have also seen how online courses can add flexibility to campus class schedules, allowing students to accelerate their degree progress. Likewise, students have shared with me some of the obstacles that prevented them from completing their online courses. For some, the lack of a fixed schedule became a barrier when they were unable to manage their time and navigate an independent learning environment. Other students were challenged by the demands presented by the online course content. Some students shared how the very opportunities of online learning became obstacles for them. With already overscheduled lives, these students believed online courses would be easier and less time consuming. They quickly learned that online courses require as much or more time than scheduled campus classes. Even with the added convenience and flexibility, these students did not have sufficient time in their already busy lives to complete their online courses, and they eventually withdrew or failed these classes. The opportunities and obstacles woven throughout these stories compelled me to better understand the community college

student experience in online courses. It is my hope the findings of my study will increase the opportunities and reduce the obstacles for community college students seeking access to higher education through online classes.

Personal Reflections

My interest in students studying at a distance began over a decade ago in my work as a counselor at a satellite center of a community college. Two year associate's degrees were offered at the site. These degree offerings were supplemented with telecourses available from a sister community college. My years of experience working with students, reviewing records, and noting anecdotal evidence, led me to believe student persistence was especially problematic in distance education courses. I dissuaded students from enrolling in distance education courses, especially when comparable classes were available at the center. In cases where distance classes were the only alternative, I clearly explained the course expectations to these students.

In the late 1990s, online classes replaced the telecourses offered earlier in the decade. At my college these classes were very popular, and spaces filled immediately when registration opened. My inquiring eye led me to end of semester enrollment reports that showed high numbers of students with grades of Ws or Fs. Given my earlier experience with students enrolled in telecourses, I was not surprised to learn that students at my college had high rates of non-completion in online courses. As I worked with increasing numbers of students enrolled in online courses, my interest in understanding their experiences grew. Even with many institutional safe guards such as advising, prerequisites, and orientation sessions, I was not able to explain why large numbers of students were unable to complete their online courses. My interest in this population of

students continued as I searched for a doctoral program that would meet my educational goals, provide flexibility to continue my community college career, and allow me to tend to the needs of my growing family.

In the 2001, I enrolled in the Community College Leadership (CCLeader) doctoral program at Colorado State University (CSU). This program was delivered at a distance in a multimodality format of weekly synchronous meetings facilitated by a telephone bridge and asynchronous participation supported by online courseware. It provided the perfect opportunity to continue my education with the added advantage of gaining experience as a distance education student.

As I flew into the Denver airport for my first class late in August of 2001, I had no idea what was ahead on my journey. Entering a doctoral program was frightening enough, but enrolling in a program 2000 miles from home was quite another matter. When I arrived on the CSU campus to start my class, I soon met the course faculty and my classmates. I was relieved to find I was not the only one studying from a distance. The students in the room had traveled from communities hundreds of miles from the University. The CCLLeader chair assured us he had carefully built the program in a way that we could all be successful.

Even with these assurances, I felt insecure. I asked myself over and over again, how could I make this work? I thought of my community college students and remembered the many lessons they had taught me. With my years of experience, I was well aware of the sacrifices and difficult choices they made to continue their education. I reminded myself, if my students could succeed, so could I! I returned home believing I could overcome any challenges that might impede my success.

The first challenges occurred early in the semester. The program required extensive group work. My small group consisted of four women located in three different states separated by three time zones. We were all busy with full-time jobs, children, husbands, and now a doctoral program. Getting our lives synchronized and finding the best way to communicate was a major challenge. We pushed forward and managed to find a time on the telephone bridge that worked for everyone. The program faculty members were very supportive. A telephone call to one or more of them helped me through the most frustrating moments of the first semester and allowed me to find solutions to the challenges I faced.

From time to time, I remember feeling isolated and alone. All of us within our small groups got to know each other fairly quickly. Whenever I would feel lost or lonely, I would make a phone call to one of my classmates. In addition, our regular assignments included journaling. The faculty members were very responsive and quick to send an encouraging reply to a distressing journal or e-mail.

I often think back to those early days in my program and wonder how I had the courage to continue. Fortunately, my program was designed in such a way to provide support from many different directions. I became a more experienced distance learner as I journeyed through my program. With each new experience, I became more resourceful and independent in resolving emerging problems.

My experience as a distance education student added to my understanding of community college students enrolled in online courses. Some, like me, enrolled in these courses to gain access to higher education. I observed many who were able to complete their courses by this delivery method. Others, like Jane, described in my opening

vignette, withdrew from their distance education classes. Some drifted away and failed their courses. As I learned more about distance education, I became more intrigued with community college online students, and decided to make this group of students the focus of my dissertation study.

Opportunity for Access

Jane found she could continue her education because her local community college offered flexible course offerings at an affordable rate. This opportunity provided her an avenue of access to higher education. Such access is core to the mission of community colleges throughout the United States. A common theme in these mission statements is to provide affordable access to higher education for all who desire to learn, regardless of their educational, economic, or ethnic background (Bogart, 1994).

Historically community colleges have embraced the mission of access by offering open admissions policies, comprehensive curriculum, and flexible class schedules in convenient locations (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Distance education has played a major role in addressing access needs for those who desire or require higher education (Granger & Bowman, 2003). Distance education options such as correspondence courses have been available since the origins of the community college (Matthews, 1999); however, recent developments in technology during the past decade enabled community colleges to extend the open access mission (Floyd, 2003). Distance education technology has dramatically increased the number of single courses and entire degree programs offered to students who cannot or prefer not to attend traditional campus classes (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Dalziel, 2003; Kozieracki, 1999; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999, 2000).

Community college students choose distance education courses and programs for a myriad of reasons (Dalziel, 2003). Many do not have the time to attend traditional synchronous campus classes because of work and family obligations. Others find distance learning courses a way to expand their semester schedule of classes beyond the offerings at the campus. Health care workers, fire fighters, and police officers find distance education compatible with their dynamic shift schedules. Many other community college students find access to higher education convenient and flexible through distance education. In recent years, online courses have become the primary method of distance education delivery in community colleges (Dabbaggh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Dalziel, 2003; Shultz, 2001).

Expanded Opportunities

In a nationwide study of online learning programs, Allen and Seaman (2004) reported that over 1.9 million post secondary students took at least one online college course during the 2003 fall semester. Allen and Seaman (2006) reported that 2.3 million students enrolled in online courses during the 2004 fall semester, and nearly 3.2 million students took at least one online course in the 2005 fall semester. They reported that the trend in online enrollment growth continues to increase with online learners representing 17% of all higher education students. Allen and Seaman (2006) reported that 96% of all higher education public institutions provided opportunities for online learners. Those granting associate's degrees, such as community colleges, enrolled more than half of all online learners.

It is no surprise that community colleges have the orientation and flexibility to respond to change. These institutions are leading the way in the development and

delivery of online courses and programs. For example, the site of my study is part of a community college system that has followed national trends with a 19% increase from fall 2001 to fall 2002. This trend has continued and enrollment growth has increased at rates from 12 to 15% each year from 2003 to 2006. This information was obtained from the institutional research web page of the community college system for the site of my study.

Obstacles to Access

As avenues of access to higher education expand through online learning options, these same opportunities present obstacles for students who drop, withdraw, and fail online courses at high rates (Carr, 2000). Related literature commonly refers to this problem as attrition, persistence, or retention. Carr reported that student attrition increases when the instructor and the student are in different locations. In addition, she noted many appealing aspects of online learning, such as flexibility to accommodate busy work schedules and family demands, are often the same elements that interfere with a student's ability to persist in these courses. Carr found that students often underestimate the time required to complete online courses. Studies of online student attrition, persistence, or retention conducted at individual community colleges confirm Carr's findings with reported dropout rates 15 to 50 % higher in online classes than in face-to-face, synchronous campus options (Crabtree, 2000; Granger & Bowman, 2003; Kennedy, 2001; Pedone, 2003; York, 2003; Zimmerman, 2002). The site of my study is part of a community college system that provided online reports showing 2001 attrition rates of online courses 15% higher than all other course registrations. A 2004 institutional research report at the site of my study showed particular online courses in subject areas

such as Principles of Accounting I, Precalculus, Statistics, and Basic Computer Skills with combined withdrawal and failure rates of 30% and higher.

When students drop, withdraw, or fail their online courses, the community college's promise of access to higher education is undermined. As community colleges continue to expand opportunities for students through online learning, it is essential for educators to understand why large numbers of students drop, withdraw, or fail these courses. I turned to the literature on student retention, attrition, and persistence within distance education to better understand this issue.

Student Retention, Attrition, Persistence in Online Courses

Online learning has evolved from the larger arena of distance education (Dabbah & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). The literature and research in distance education addresses the challenges of student retention, attrition, and persistence. This is a broad body of literature that includes the study of many types of synchronous and asynchronous educational delivery modes. Likewise, the research in this body of literature includes students in all phases of higher education including those in two year, four year, and graduate programs. Student needs and their preparedness for education vary greatly throughout different program levels. To provide focus for my study, I identified research situated within the general distance education literature that closely relates to attrition and persistence of community college online learners.

Barriers to Persistence: Early Foundations

In the book *Adults as Learners: Increasing Participation and Facilitating Learning*, Cross (1981) identified three categories of barriers to adult learners. She described these barriers as situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers

are those that arise from one's life situation at the time. Institutional barriers originate from practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in educational activities. Dispositional barriers are related to learner attitudes and self-perception. Garland (1993a, 1993b) used the barrier framework described by Cross to interpret the results of her ethnographic study of university distance education students. Students in Garland's study described situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers as reasons for not completing their telecourses. In addition, Garland identified a fourth category that she labeled "epistemological" barriers. Her students encountered epistemological barriers when they lacked prerequisite knowledge, found the material too technical or theoretical, or lacked interest in the content. Morgan and Tam (1999) also studied attrition in university distance education students enrolled in telecourses. Their students described reasons for dropping out of their courses that fit the four categories of barriers illustrated in Garland's research.

Bridges from Distance Education to Community College Online Learning

Schilke (2001) linked the results of his case study of community college online learners to the work of Garland (1993a, 1993b) and Morgan and Tam (1999). He bridged the research on student attrition reported in earlier forms of distance education telecourses by applying his findings to the situational, dispositional, institutional, and epistemological framework, adding technological barriers as a fifth dimension for online community college students. Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner, and Ison (2002) also used Garland's barrier framework to explain student attrition in their study of community college students enrolled in online courses.

Harbeck (2001), Kennedy (2001), and Pedone (2003) used qualitative research methods to study community college online students. While not specifically labeling the findings as barriers, these studies identified themes for student persistence and attrition similar to the situational, dispositional, institutional, epistemological, and technical barriers described by Cross (1981), Garland (1993a, 1993b), Moore, et al. (2002), Morgan and Tam (1999), and Schilke (2001).

Research Needs Identified from Quantitative Study

Jamison (2003), Massa (2003), and Zimmerman (2002) used quantitative research methods to focus on theories of student retention in community college online courses. Self-regulation, self-efficacy, and motivation were the common theories generated by these dissertation studies. Each focused on single predictors to explain student persistence and attrition. Jamison, Massa, and Zimmerman recommended further probing on the role of self-regulation, self-efficacy, and motivation with other community college student populations.

Bangurah (2004), Crabtree (2000), and York (2003) studied student records to compare community college online students with synchronous campus learners in order to identify differences. They analyzed student records to establish distinguishing student characteristics. While each was able to report two distinct student profiles for comparable campus and online classes, all three proposed more specialized study to better understand the problem of student retention in online learning. Bangurah and Crabtree suggested further study focused on specific course offerings to determine particular issues that contribute to student retention. York recommended a qualitative approach to study the student experience in an effort to better understand student issues related to retention.

Aljarrah (2000), Reed (2001), and Schultz (2001) generated descriptive reports about the community college student experience in online learning. Each of these studies surveyed students to assess their satisfaction with online learning experiences. While these studies provided information on aspects of what students like about their online experiences, they fall short on reaching the student who drops, withdraws, or fails. Reed noted that students responding to surveys and those who agree to participate in the research are often those students who are succeeding and satisfied. He noted satisfaction studies fail to reach unsuccessful and unsatisfied students. He recommended researchers employ strategies to study students who become attrition statistics.

The quantitative studies (Aljarrah, 2000; Bangurah, 2004; Crabtree, 2000; Jamison, 2003; Massa, 2003; Reed, 2001; Schultz, 2001; York, 2003; Zimmerman, 2002) and some of the qualitative studies (Harbeck, 2001; Kennedy, 2001; Schilke, 2001) referenced above were conducted with populations of students enrolled in a cross section of online courses offerings. While this approach can provide an understanding of general aspects of the student experience, it presents limits in understanding more specific challenges experienced by students in particular academic areas.

Bangurah (2004) noted the need for further research of the student experience in specific academic disciplines to determine if some courses are more suited for online delivery. Crabtree (2000) recommended the study of courses where persistence is a particular problem. Such courses are referred to as “high risk.” Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) described high risk courses as those that have 30% or more withdrawals and final course grades of D or F.

A Call for Qualitative Study

As I studied the literature, I found quantitative studies focused on theory building (Jamison, 2003; Massa, 2003; Zimmerman, 2002), campus and online comparison (Bangurah, 2004; Crabtree, 2000; York, 2003), and student satisfaction (Aljarrah, 2000; Reed, 2001; Schultz, 2001) contributed important dimensions to understanding community college student retention in online courses. But these studies do not fully explain the quandary of high rates of drop-out, withdrawal, and failure of community college online students.

The foundations provided by Garland (1993), Morgan and Tam (1999), and Schilke (2001) observed that survey questions and brief interviews only gathered data supporting a superficial account of the student experience. Morgan and Tam found the research on student persistence and attrition in distance education frequently used studies that isolated and measured traits and factors leading to student attrition. These studies examined demographics, personality characteristics, learning styles, and other aspects of the individual. Morgan and Tam argued that trait and factor approaches only partially explain reasons for student attrition and persistence. They advocated a holistic approach that identifies the interrelated aspects of the student experience. They expressed this need by stating, "It is in the interest of distance educators to acquire an insight into both the positive and negative factors that affect student persistence through understanding how students interpret their experiences and their circumstances" (p. 99). Morgan and Tam contended the most complete way to understand the student experience is to listen to what they say it means to them.

Qualitative research methods provide an avenue to probe the problem of community college student persistence and attrition in online courses. Creswell (1998) described qualitative research as an inquiry process where the researcher builds a “complex, holistic picture [by exploring] multiple dimensions of a problem or issue” (p. 15), and reports the findings through an elaborate narrative.

The review of literature for my study confirmed this perspective. The quantitative studies that I reviewed (Aljarrah, 2000; Bangurah, 2004; Crabtree, 2000; Houle, 2004; Jamison, 2003; Massa, 2003; Reed, 2001; Schultz, 2001; Zimmerman, 2002; York, 2003) provided only a partial understanding of the community college student enrolled in online courses. These quantitative studies identified specific areas of focus for qualitative study. York (2003) recommended a qualitative approach to study the student experience in an effort to better understand issues related to retention. Both Bangurah (2004) and Crabtree (2000) recommended study of community college students enrolled in courses where student persistence is a particular challenge. These studies pointed to the need for a holistic study focused on the experiences of specific students, in specific courses, and especially those students in courses with high rates of drop-out, withdrawal, or failure. Qualitative study provided an avenue for me to explore this population of students.

Abyss of Inquiry

As I studied the literature, I found several qualitative studies that probed the community college student experience in online courses (Harbeck, 2001; Kennedy, 2001; Pedone, 2003; Schilke, 2001), but none specifically focused on community college students enrolled in online courses with high rates of drop-out, withdrawal, or failure. This abyss of inquiry led me to my research problem.

Research Problem

My research problem emerged from a combination of my professional work with community college students, my personal experience as a distance education student, and my study of the literature. Distance education in the form of online courses provides access and opportunities for growing numbers of community college students. The problem that occurs with this form of access is that course completion is a challenge for some online learners, particularly those in courses with high rates of drop-out, withdrawal, or failure. Through my literature review, I identified several studies that explored the experiences of the community college online student, but none focused specifically on students enrolled in courses with high rates of drop-out, withdrawal or failure. My study emerged from the need for further research with students enrolled in courses with high rates of drop-out, withdrawal or failure.

Purpose Statement

My study examined the lived experiences of community college students enrolled in courses with high rates of drop-out, withdrawal or failure. Within a qualitative research design, I selected phenomenology as the method to address to my research questions. Phenomenology provides a research approach that allows for in-depth study of participants who share a common experience (Moustakas, 1994). This research approach allowed me to identify common themes that emerged from community college students enrolled in HRCs to describe the essence of their experience. I selected a community college with a program of online courses in a location accessible to me. For the past several years, this college generated a distance education report that allowed me to identify online courses with particularly high rates of attrition when students drop-out,

withdraw, or fail courses. I used these reports to identify high risk courses, described by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) as those that have 30% or more withdrawals or final course grades of D or F. I adopted this definition for my study and defined a high risk online course (HRC) as one with a combined withdrawal and failure of 30% or greater as identified by the institutional research office at the site of my study.

I invited students enrolled in select HRCs to participate in my study. Through in-depth interviews I documented and analyzed student experiences to identify emerging themes that described the essence of the experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs.

Research Questions

The following research questions provided guidance for my study:

1. What is the lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs?
2. What are the opportunities experienced by community college students enrolled in HRCs?
3. What obstacles face the community college students enrolled in HRCs?
4. What other factors or conditions contribute to the lived experiences of community college students enrolled in HRCs?

Significance of the Study

Online learning is rapidly expanding in community colleges. It is also a relatively new form of distance education delivery and little is known about the community college student experience in online courses. The literature reports concern for high rates of student drop-out, withdrawal, and failure in community college online courses. My study focused on what community college online students experience in their HRCs and how

they experienced these courses. My study promotes a better understanding of this phenomenon through the collective voice of community college students. Accordingly, my study offers a significant contribution to the literature because it provides the perspective of the student who has experienced an HRC. An advanced understanding of this phenomenon may help community college personnel develop strategies to assist students to complete their online courses. Increased completion of online courses may help community college students maximize opportunities of access to higher education.

Researcher's Perspective

Researcher reflection and clarification of biases are essential to the first step in a phenomenological study. As I wrote the proposal for my study, I began noting the biases that I brought to the research. I made a focused effort to monitor my biases so that I could fully engage in understanding the experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs. With over 13 years of experience in community colleges as a counselor, online instructor, and an administrator, I came to the study with my own understanding of the student experience. I talked with many students about the opportunities and obstacles of their distance education experiences. I encouraged them to be self-motivated, self-directed, highly organized, and excellent time managers. I emphasized they must be prepared to work harder in their online courses than their synchronous on campus courses. I believed with the right approach and attitude, they could have an outstanding educational experience in their online class.

As I began my study, I realized that some of my own experiences might be similar to those of my participants. I made every effort to identify, understand, and bracket my personal and professional biases. I acknowledged to myself that the community college

student experience might be very different from my own experience as a doctoral student at a large university. In addition, I also tried to step outside my role as a counselor and set aside the bias my experience brought to the research. This clarification allowed me to more fully understand the experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs.

Conclusion

In this first chapter, I shared the rationale and context for my study. Through the opening vignette, I focused on the importance of understanding the individual student experience. I linked the story of a community college student and my own experience as a distance education student to the literature. This connection allowed me to develop the research questions for my study.

The second chapter provides a detailed literature review that offered additional context for my research. The third chapter explains my methodology and a description of the site and participants in my study. In the fourth chapter, I present the results of my study through the distinct voices of participants who experienced the phenomenon. This chapter includes thick, rich descriptions of the lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs. I integrate and summarize my findings in the fifth chapter and provide suggestions for practice and research. I close my dissertation with final reflections.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Moustakas (1994) articulated the importance of a literature review in phenomenological study. He stated, “The investigator assesses the prior relevant studies; distinguishes their designs, methodologies, and findings from the investigators own study; and indicates what new knowledge he or she is seeking and expects to obtain” (p. 111). Wild and Ebbers (2002) recommended a three part approach to the review of literature in the study of community college student retention. First, they advocated for a clear context and definition of retention. Second, they emphasized the importance of understanding related theory. Finally, like Moustakas, Wild and Ebbers recommended a review of existing studies related to the area of investigation to appropriately apply the findings of the research and identify the needed direction of future studies.

The literature review follows the recommendations of Moustakas (1994) and Wild and Ebbers (2002) and provides the context and rationale for my research questions. This chapter is organized in three parts. Part 1 provides contextual background for my research problem and questions through an overview of the literature regarding (a) history of the community college, (b) community college students, (c) distance education, (d) online course delivery, (e) online students, and (f) growth in community college online learning. Part 2 describes the theory that provides a foundation for my study. This section presents a review of relevant literature concerning adult learning theory, student retention theory, and recent research that relates theory to community college online students. Part 3, the

final section of this chapter, focuses on select research studies concerned with attrition and persistence of community college students enrolled in online courses.

Part 1: Contextual Background

The Community College: A History of Access

For almost a century, public two-year institutions have played an increasing role in broadening access to postsecondary education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). With the flexibility and responsiveness to change, these centers for educational opportunity, commonly known today as community colleges, have developed a major position in higher education. Horn and Nevill (2006) reported that in academic year 2003–2004, approximately 40% of all undergraduates enrolled in post secondary education were community college students. Since the beginning of the community college movement, these institutions have served a critical role in expanding access to higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). A brief history follows to provide context for my study.

The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 mark the philosophical origins of the American Community College. This legislation provided the grounding for the establishment of public supported universities in every state, expanding higher education access for students previously excluded. Many of these institutions began as agricultural institutes or teacher-training colleges, and provided lower cost options compared to private colleges. By the early 1900s demand for public education increased and these institutions expanded programs and services (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Joliet Junior College, the oldest public two-year college, was formed in 1901 under the influence of William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago (Deegan & Tillery, 1985). Harper contended junior colleges should provide lower

division requirements of university study as well as vocational training for 19 and 20 year old students allowing “higher-order scholarship” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 7) for universities.

In California, Stanford president David Starr Jordan advocated for a similar role for junior colleges in order to create a seamless educational system of kindergarten through graduate school. While implementation of such proposals never became widespread, in the early 1900s, demand for access to a college education grew (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). California was first to provide programs that extended secondary education equivalent to the first two years of college (Deegan & Tillery, 1985).

During the 1930s and 1940s, there was little growth in the number of two year colleges. However, the passage of the GI Bill of Rights in 1944, allowing financial assistance for veterans of military service, provided a significant boost to the growth of community colleges for the following two decades (Deegan & Tillery, 1985). By the mid-1960s, community colleges were opening at a rate of one per week. The community college open door admissions policy became the keystone of access to higher education. In addition, student financial aid legislation within the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the 1972 amendments provided many with the means to pursue their education (Deegan & Tillery, 1985).

During the 1970s and 1980s community colleges placed additional emphasis on career and technical programs, community service, non-credit programs, and nontraditional delivery options, including distance education (Deegan & Tillery, 1985). By the 1990s community colleges were positioned as prominent leaders in the landscape of higher education. The comprehensive mission of community colleges offering

“something for everyone in the community, [where] everyone is a potential student” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 39) positioned these institutions to be the primary conduit of online education today. Leading works in the literature of community colleges provide a description of this diverse population.

Community College Students: Reflection of Diversity

Currently, community college students represent approximately 40% of all undergraduates (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Over half of these students were the first in their family to enroll in college (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). Community colleges continue to support their mission through open access to most everyone who seeks post secondary educational opportunities. The American community college adult student population continues to be complex and diverse (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Phillippe and Sullivan (2005) provided a national profile of community college students. They reported that 58% of community college students are women. The average age of the community college student is 29 years. Student age ranges from under 18 for those in high school dual enrollment programs to over 60 for senior citizens attending classes for personal growth and enrichment. Forty-six percent of community college students are 25 years and older. The ethnic makeup varies, depending on the geographic location, but nationally, of all students enrolled in postsecondary education, 47% of African Americans, 56% of Hispanics, 48% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 57% of Native Americans are community college students. Over 62% of community college students enroll on a part-time basis, leaving 38% taking a full-time course load of twelve or more credits. In addition, access to community colleges for 46% of all students is enhanced through financial aid programs such as federal Pell grants, state aid, and

campus based aid. Over 80% of community college students are employed full or part-time. Many balance their studies with work and family responsibilities. Community colleges offer a wide array of courses at varying times spanning days, nights, and weekends. The increasing availability and use of the Internet has allowed additional options for course delivery through online and distance education technology to community college students (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). Given the demographics of the nontraditional community college student population, it is not surprising that over half of all postsecondary students enrolled in online courses are students of associate's degree granting institutions like community colleges (Allen & Seaman, 2004, 2006). A closer look at distance education and online courses follows.

Distance Education: Yesterday and Today

The British were the first in the modern era to pioneer distance education on a massive scale. In 1969, the United Kingdom founded the Open University (OU). The OU mailed carefully constructed print, audio, and video learning materials to students. The materials were supplemented through radio and television broadcasts. Students received individual support through an assigned tutor who provided individual and group assistance over the telephone at times convenient to students. The OU extended throughout the United Kingdom and Canada, raising the profile of distance education into the greater arena of higher education (Curran, 1997).

As technology advanced during the later part of the twentieth century in the United States, distance education modes expanded beyond correspondence or home study courses to include audio conferencing, taped and broadcast telecourses, satellite delivered courses, and interactive television. Microchip technology in cameras, computers, and

network components provide high quality sound, images, and course management systems that have allowed for a new level of instructional delivery through online learning (Matthew, 1999).

These recent technological advances have expanded the focus of distance education from nontraditional students who may not have access to a college campus to traditional college student populations (Guernsey, 1998). With overcrowded classrooms and shrinking state budgets for capital projects, educational administrators have viewed distance education as the key to access for both learners who live hundreds of miles from the college as well as those who live next door to the college (Seehusen, 2000). The following discussion demonstrates how this delivery method provides greater access to higher education for the contemporary community college student.

Distance Education: A Definition

Distance education is a broad field of study. Moore and Anderson (2003) provided the following definition for the concept:

All forms of education in which all or most of the teaching is conducted in a different space than the learning, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through a communications technology (p. xiv).

They identified numerous subgroups of study within the larger field of distance education. For example, tele-learning and e-learning emphasize the particular technology used in educational delivery. Distributed learning and distant learning focus not as much on the technology, but on the location of learners. Open learning and flexible learning formats allow distance students relative freedom of control over learning compared to more conventional educational settings. Moore and Anderson were careful to point out these concepts are not synonyms for distance education, but rather subgroups that

distinguish particular aspects of distance education. Dabbaggh and Bannan-Ritland (2005) explained how online learning is situated within this framework.

Online Learning: An Introduction

Dabbaggh and Bannan-Ritland (2005) distinguished online learning from distance learning. They conceptualized distance learning as broad pedagogical constructs in which learning takes place through “distributed forms of interactions occurring across time, place, and various media” (p. 22). They asserted that distance learning can be implemented through a variety of applications including audio, video, or computer technologies and can occur either synchronously or asynchronously. Dabbaggh and Bannan-Ritland placed online learning as a category within the broader distance learning context. These authors described online learning as one type of distance learning that “uses Internet and Web-based technologies to support distributed forms of interactions” (p. 22). Their construct described web-based instruction as a specific type of online learning that uses web-based authoring tools, course management systems, and is delivered asynchronously.

Online Learners

Dabbaggh and Bannan-Ritland (2005) also distinguished today’s online learner from the distance learner of yesterday. They described the classic distance learner as an adult who is independent, place-bound, self-motivated, disciplined, a self-starter, and goal oriented. They asserted that the contemporary online learner is an emergent student who is adept at social negotiation and collaborative learning. Seehusen (2000) added to this understanding by explaining that within today’s online classes, there are the classic time and place bound distance learning students, along with a new generation of students

who simply prefer this delivery mode of higher education. Online courses allow these students the opportunity to enroll in additional program requirements without concern for time conflicts with other classes or work schedules. These students make up many of today's community college online learners.

Growth in Community Colleges Online Learning

Online course delivery has expanded access to higher education to a wide audience of learners. Allen and Seaman (2004, 2006) found online classes enrollments have grown by at least 20% annually from 2002 to 2005. This growth has exceeded the overall rate of increase in higher education student enrollment. They reported in excess of 3.1 million online students in 2005.

Allen and Seaman (2004, 2006) noted institutions offering associate's degrees enrolled over half of all online students. This included the many who attend community colleges such as commuters, shift workers, the disabled, students in remote locations, mothers caring for young children at home, and retirees caring for elderly parents (Dalziel, 2003). Some are neither time nor place bound, but simply prefer online learning as a course delivery method (Seehusen, 2000).

Part 1 Summary

In this section I provided contextual background for my research problem and questions through an overview of the literature regarding (a) a history of the community college, (b) community college students, (c) distance education, (d) online course delivery, (e) online students, and (f) growth in community college online learning. Following is a summary of my key points.

Throughout the history of community colleges, access has been foundational to the community college mission (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Through open admissions policies, community colleges invite a diverse population of students into the classroom. Throughout the years, community college distance education programs have provided alternative instructional delivery methods in an effort to meet the needs of a diverse population of students (Deegan & Tillery, 1985). These offerings have extended the traditional open access mission of the college that includes affordable higher educational opportunities to all in need or desire to learn regardless of background (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Distance education in community colleges is rapidly expanding access to higher education through online courses and programs. Many students are attracted to online learning opportunities as evidenced by the rapid growth that has occurred in recent years (Allen & Seaman, 2004, 2006). The profile of these students not only includes traditional time and place bound distance education students, but also those who prefer learning through online course delivery methods (Seehusen, 2000).

As community colleges, distance education, and online learning evolve, comprehending the needs of this diverse group of students within a dynamic educational environment is a complex challenge. A review of key theoretical underpinnings follows to further understand community college online students.

Part 2: Theoretical Foundations

Adult Learning Theory

My study focused on community college students enrolled in online courses. An understanding of learning in adulthood is important for two reasons. First, the average

age of community college students is 29, and nearly half of all community college students are over the age of 24 (Phillipe & Sullivan, 2005). Second, distance education delivery tends to serve adult populations between the ages of 25 and 45 (Carlson, 2004).

Merriam (1993) described the adult learning field as “diverse in content, clientele, and delivery systems” (p. 5). She identified three major areas of study that distinguishes adults from pre-adult learners. The first is the study of andragogy, a concept that provides a set of guidelines to design adult learning. A second area is self-directed learning, where learning occurs primarily through the initiatives of the learner. Self-directed learning provides philosophical grounding for andragogy (Pratt, 1993). Self-directed learning focuses on the process of how learning takes place. The third area of study that describes learning in adulthood is transformational learning. This facet of adult learning focuses on the change that takes place for the learner. To add to the context of my study, a brief overview of (a) andragogy, (b) self-directed learning, and (c) transformational learning follows.

Andragogy

Malcolm Knowles (1980) introduced the concept of andragogy as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 43). Knowles contrasted andragogy with pedagogy, the methods to help children learn. In the development of this construct, Knowles represented pedagogy and andragogy as a continuum of teacher directed and student self-directed learning. Knowles recognized that depending on the situation, both approaches to learning are appropriate for children and adults. Merriam (1993) explained “while andragogy does not define the uniqueness of adult learning, it does provide a set of

guidelines for designing instruction with learners who are more self-directed than teacher directed,” (p. 9).

Pratt (1993) summarized the five assumptions of adult learning foundational to Malcolm Knowles’ (1980) concept of andragogy. These assumptions are (a) learner self-concept, (b) prior experience, (c) readiness to learn, (d) learning orientation, and (e) motivation to learn. Learner self-concept, the most important assumption of andragogy, describes how individuals view themselves and their experience within their world. Andragogy portrays learners who construct meaning and knowledge based on their self-concept and prior experience. Andragogy also emphasizes that learning tends to be more subjective than objective, and thus learners are ready, prepared, and motivated to learn when learning is important to their subjective position in the world. From these assumptions, Pratt articulated two principles on which andragogy rests: “First, knowledge is assumed to be actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment; and second, learning is an interactive process of interpretation, integration, and transformation of one’s experiential world” (p. 17).

Self-directed Learning

The philosophical orientation of self-directed learning is humanistic (Caffarella, 1993). This perspective places the individual at the center of learning, with a focus on self-development, where learner needs are more important than content. Caffarella acknowledged three guiding principles that illustrate self-directed learning. First, learning is a self-initiated process that emphasizes the ability of individuals to plan and manage their own learning. Second, self-directed learning is a personal attribute or characteristic of autonomous learners. Third, self-directed learning is a way of organizing instruction

that allows for greater learner control. The role of educators in self-directed learning is one of a facilitator rather than a content expert.

Transformational Learning

A third field of adult education prominent in the literature is transformational learning. Change is the essential element in transformational learning. Clark (1993) articulated that while all learning results in change, transformational learning implies more far reaching outcomes that shapes people “in ways both they and others can recognize” (p. 47). Clark summarized transformational learning as formal or informal that can occur either gradually or suddenly, and is connected to the adult developmental process.

Wild and Ebbers (2002) noted the importance of theory to the understanding of community college student retention. Elements of the three tenants of adult learning theory, andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformational learning, are applicable to my study because distance education tends to serve adult populations (Carlson, 2004). In addition, Wild and Ebbers emphasized the importance of a review of the foundational theory in the area of student attrition and retention. The following section highlights theories of attrition and retention that relate to my research.

Attrition and Retention Theory

The study of college student attrition and retention led to the development of several theoretical models to identify, analyze, and explain reasons why students drop-out or remain in college courses and programs (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975). The work of Spady, Tinto, as well as, Bean and Metzner are representative of the theoretical models found in the study of community college student retention

(Summers, 2003). Kember (1989, 1990, 1995) adapted these models to the field of distance education. A brief description of each is provided to add to the contextual background of this study.

Spady: Early Foundations

Spady (1970, 1971) introduced one of the first conceptual models to explain student attrition. Spady used Durkheim's (1950) suicide model to ground his theory. Durkheim proposed suicidal tendencies increased in people who were not fully integrated normally and socially into the fabric of society. He posited the likelihood of suicide increased when low moral consciousness (normative congruence) and insufficient collective affiliation (friendship support) were present. Spady constructed a sociological model that paralleled Durkheim's theory of suicide to explain why students chose to leave college. Acknowledging the influence of family background on student adjustment, Spady proposed that intellectual development, grade performance, normative congruence, and friendship support combined to influence social integration of the student into the academic and social systems of the college. Spady argued that for traditional students to persist in postsecondary education, social integration into the fabric of the institution was necessary.

Tinto: Academic and Social Integration

Tinto (1975) continued the study of student attrition and persistence by connecting his model to the theories of Durkheim (1951) and Spady (1970, 1971). Tinto's social integration model was based on the assumption that colleges are social systems. Tinto believed that a traditional student's decision to remain or depart from college was related to the degree of integration into the social and academic life within

the college community. Essential to Tinto's model was the cumulative effect over time of multiple variables that included student background, commitment to study, and interaction of both peers and faculty as major contributors of academic and social integration. Later work by Tinto (1987, 1993) led to an expansion of his original model to provide a more sophisticated longitudinal model of student departure relevant to the community college experience that included the interaction of multiple aspects such as personal adjustment, academic difficulty, incongruence, feelings of isolation, finances, learning, and external obligations or commitments.

Bean and Metzner: Nontraditional Students

Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a model of attrition for nontraditional college students. They contended that theoretical models developed by Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975) to explain attrition of traditional students relied heavily on the absence of social integration to explain student departure. Based on observations that nontraditional students are often adult commuter students, unable to take advantage of social aspects of the college setting, Bean and Metzner recognized the need for a different theory that could explain the departure process for nontraditional students. Their work was based on a model developed by Bean (1980) adapted from an organizational model to explain employee turnover in the workplace. The Bean and Metzner conceptual model assigned a less important role to social integration in explaining attrition of nontraditional students. Thus, Bean and Metzner developed a model of student attrition that emphasized the interaction of both academic and environmental factors. They placed emphasis on the environmental influences such as positive family support, adequate finances, and

appropriate childcare. They contended that environmental influences weighed heavier in the decision to stay in school than academic factors alone.

Kember: Distance Education Applications

Kember (1989, 1990, 1995) extended the models developed by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985) to consider not only students enrolled in college courses, but adult students taking courses at a distance. Kember (1990) noted, “Drop-out from distance education is a complex phenomenon influenced by a multitude of variables” (p. 11). He proposed that variables are interdependent, each influencing the other, with no single explanation for student drop-out. Kember’s model of drop-out from distance education incorporates student characteristics, goal commitment, academic environment and integration, social environment and integration, and cost benefits analysis to determine whether a student completes or drops out of a distance education courses.

Online Learning Applications

Houle (2004) explored the validity of existing models of adult student persistence for associate’s degree students enrolled in online courses. Houle found Kember’s (1995) model a good fit to explain the data. Essentially, Houle’s application of Kember’s model suggested that successful online students are those who take responsibility for their own progress. Unsuccessful students are those who are unwilling to make sacrifices or negotiate study time. Her results showed that successful online students had a location at home where they studied, 16 or more years of work experience, higher grade point averages, and higher intrinsic motivation scores.

Part 2 Summary

In this section I highlighted two theoretical areas of the literature related to my research problem and questions. I first explored basic tenants of adult learning theory. I followed with related literature on student attrition and retention.

Most students in distance education at the community college tend to be adults (Carlson, 2004; Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). I provided an overview of three tenants of adult learning theory, andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformational learning to provide context for my study.

I explored theories of student attrition and retention to further understand the student experience. The literature that I reviewed offered theoretical explanations for various aspects of student attrition and retention. I highlighted models developed by Spady (1970, 1971), Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), and Bean and Metzner (1985) because they are commonly referenced in studies of community college student retention (Summers, 2003). In addition, these models provided a framework for Kember's (1989, 1990, 1995) adaptation to distance education and later application by Houle (2004) for online community college students. For the most part, these models provide a framework to explain why students drop-out of or stay in school. They do not necessarily address the student experience of a particular class, which may or may not contribute to the overall student experience at the institution. My study examined the student experience in online courses with historically high rates of drop-out, withdrawal, or failure. These theoretical reference points are offered to provide context for the results of my study.

In addition to recognizing the importance of theory in understanding the student experience, Moustakas (1994) and Wild and Ebbers (2002) emphasized the need to examine existing, relevant research. I turn next to the research related to my study.

Part 3: Related Research

Part 3 of my literature review is organized in three sections. I first provide an overview of the literature on the student experience in distance education and the major themes presented. The second section is focused on research that has investigated specific barriers surrounding the student experience in distance education. Finally, I highlight select research that relates closely to the experience of the community college online learner. I begin with the literature of distance education.

Early Distance Education

Cookson (1989) provided a thorough review of the early literature of learners in distance education. The review primarily focused on studies of student persistence and attrition in the British Open University for the period of 1970 to 1989. Three categories of research relating to the student perspective emerged from Cookson's review: (a) studies of student reasons for dropout, (b) student profile studies, and (c) studies of institutional factors.

The studies that focused on students' reasons for dropout examined personal characteristics and circumstances (Cookson, 1989). Variables such as time for study, financial commitments, employment demands, childcare requirements, and other needs surfaced in this research. Students reported personal factors such as illness, loneliness, and lack of support as reasons for dropping their distance learning classes and programs. In addition, this area of literature addressed preferences of teaching methods, learning

styles, variables in advising support, and academic preparation that affected the student experience.

A second category of research described by Cookson (1989) was student profile studies. Cookson referred to this group of research as descriptive. Some of this reported research identified the most important factors that influence student persistence. These studies focused on single variable predictors such as occupation, gender, formal educational attainment, and prior completion of distance education classes. Cookson noted that while these studies are useful in understanding learners, they are limited in providing a complete understanding of the student experience in distance education.

A third type of study in the literature noted by Cookson (1989) focused on institutional factors that involved the students' academic and social integration. This literature provided models where student background, environment, attitude, intention to drop-out, and level of early course engagement contributed significantly to attrition.

Cookson (1989) reported that in each of the three research areas, the questions posed to students greatly influenced the kind of answers that were received. Thus, explanations of why students withdrew or persisted were usually determined, at least in general terms by the researcher's approach and theoretical assumptions about attrition and retention. But, when more probing questions were asked, more in-depth, study-related reasons for withdrawal or persistence were revealed. Frequently, problems concerning methods of teaching, learning, planning, organizing, academic material, instructor response, and other issues surfaced. Cookson concluded that much of the early research focused on studies of single variables and course completion rates. Cookson noted that the literature available at the time of the review was limited and did not allow

for a complete understanding of the student experience. Cookson's assessment of the early distance learning literature provided the rationale for subsequent qualitative studies that probed in-depth analysis of student reasons for drop-out (Garland, 1993a, 1993b; Morgan & Tam, 1999).

Kember (1990) agreed with Cookson (1989) and noted there is not one reason for drop-out, nor is there one single measure that mitigates drop-out. Kember remarked that while drop-out from distance education is a complex phenomenon, "it is not too complex for investigation or intervention" (p. 11). In order to address this phenomenon, Cookson advocated for qualitative studies that allow for the interplay of multiple factors.

Galusha (1997) reviewed the literature of distance education from the perspective of learner barriers. This review identified student, faculty, and organizational barriers to distance learning. Galusha identified seven barriers specific to student persistence: (a) cost, (b) insecurities about learning, (c) student and teacher interaction, (d) student support and services, (e) alienation and isolation, (f) lack of experience, and (g) technological training. Galusha concluded by first identifying learner barriers, strategies can be developed to mitigate these circumstances. Galusha noted that many of the barriers in distance education were common to all types of delivery modalities. The research on learner barriers in distance education attempts to provide an understanding that allows for the interplay of multiple variables of this aspect of the student experience.

Berge and Mrozowski (2001) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature of distance education research for the period 1990 to 1999. They identified ten major groups of research. The categories that emerged were (a) redefining roles of key participants, (b) technology selection and adoption, (c) design issues, (d) strategies to

increase interactivity and active learning, (e) learner characteristics, (f) learner support, (g) operational issues, (h) policy and management, (i) equity and accessibility, and (j) cost benefit trade offs. This review noted an absence of research adequately explaining why drop-out rates of distance learners are higher than those for more traditional students.

Muilenburg and Berge (2001) built on the work of Berge and Mrozowski (2001) to better understand barriers to distance education. Their study of distance learning included participation from a broad range of distance education stakeholders including students, faculty, and administrators from a comprehensive array of educational settings. The ten categories of barriers that emerged from their study included (a) administrative, (b) organizational, (c) social interaction, (d) quality, (e) technology, (f) faculty compensation and time, (g) legal, (h) effectiveness, (i) access, and (j) student support services. Muilenburg and Berge noted a need for future research on barriers to distance education from the student perspective.

Barriers to Distance Education Persistence

Throughout the history of distance learning, a major focus of research surrounding attrition has been on barriers to distance education. A body of research on learner barriers in distance education originated from the work of Garland (1993a, 1993b). Garland constructed a framework of learner barriers in distance education based on early principles of participation in adult education developed by Cross (1981). Cross wrote “It is just as important to know why adults do not participate (in learning) as why they do” (p. 97). Cross identified three types of barriers to adult participation in learning and noted these barriers have relevance for self-directed learning. The three categories of

barriers are (a) situational, arising from one's life situation at the time; (b) institutional, involving practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in educational activities; and (c) dispositional, related to attitudes and self-perception of self as a learner.

These principles outlined by Cross (1981) were used by Garland (1993a, 1993b) to help explain the results of her ethnographic study of distance education students. Garland initially included a group of 47 undergraduate students registered for credit courses in natural resources sciences at the University of British Columbia. The course delivery included print based, television broadcast, video, and audio asynchronous distance learning formats. Students received support through written feedback and telephone contact from tutors. Completion of all course prerequisites was expected prior to enrollment. The population of students in the study was demographically diverse, and they had many different reasons for enrolling in this type of course delivery.

Garland (1993a, 1993b) discovered that 13 of the 17 students withdrawing from their distance course said that they did not have enough time for the course. Upon further probing, Garland discovered that the reasons were far more complex. She noted that the initial explanations of withdrawal were socially acceptable and allowed the student to maintain adult dignity. Through in-depth interviews, however, Garland discovered that while time was a factor for many students, other reasons for withdrawal included a lack of prerequisite knowledge of course content, lack of support from peers and family, stress, poor grades, procrastination, lack of face-to-face interaction with the instructor, poor instructor feedback, weak goal commitment, and fear of failure.

Garland (1993a, 1993b) categorized these reasons for withdrawal into four areas which she defined as barriers. She labeled the barriers situational, institutional, dispositional, and epistemological. In the distance education environment, situational barriers were described by Garland as those associated with a poor learning environment and lack of time to learn. This category included lack of family and peer support, over commitment of roles and responsibilities, and unclear expectations of the investment of time needed for course completion. Garland defined institutional barriers as those of cost, bureaucracy, availability of support services, and poor instructional design. Dispositional problems reflected the student's psychological and sociological makeup such as unclear goals, procrastination, incompatible learning style, and lack of self-confidence. Garland described epistemological barriers as the gap between student preparedness and the instructor's expectations in the course. Epistemological barriers occurred when a student lacked the prerequisite knowledge, found the material too technical or theoretical, or lacked interest in the content presented.

Garland's (1993a, 1993b) model has been used to understand barriers experienced by distance education students in several educational settings. At the University of Sidney, Morgan and Tam (1999) applied Garland's model to explain student drop-out in an advanced horticulture program offered exclusively through distance education. The goal of their research was to identify ways to increase student persistence in the program. Morgan and Tam mailed a questionnaire to all students enrolled in the program to find out if they intended to continue in the program. Responses were received from 118 students. Nine students indicated they did not intend to reenroll. Morgan and Tam interviewed the nine students. All of the remaining students who returned the surveys

indicated they intended to enroll. An additional nine students were randomly selected to participate in the research from the group of students who intended to continue in the program. Open, free-flowing interviews were conducted to allow students to articulate their experiences about the distance education program. In the early part of the interview, students typically offered reasons for noncompletion that tended to be superficial, socially acceptable explanations. Early in the interview, time constraints were cited as a common reason for withdrawal. As the interviews progressed, more complete accounts for noncompletion emerged. While time limitations were presented as a barrier, lack of resources, knowledge, and preparedness were among additional barriers that surfaced as the interviews progressed.

Morgan and Tam (1999) classified their data according to the four categories of barriers outlined by Garland (1993a, 1993b). This process allowed the researchers to identify common barriers for both groups, and to isolate specific reasons for student attrition. Among the reasons reported only by nonpersisters were poor family support and money problems, a situational barrier; personal study problems, a dispositional barrier; disparity in assessment requirements, course content, course sequence, and lack of prerequisite knowledge, an epistemological barrier. All barriers classified as institutional were common to both persisters and nonpersisters.

Barriers to Community College Online Students

Schilke (2001) conducted a case study focused on factors that influenced community college students to drop-out of their online courses. Through case study methodology, he approached his research from the learner's perspective. In this study, all participants were over the age of 18 and had been enrolled in online classes during the

past two semesters prior to the study. The subjects of the study were a random cross section of students who had registered and subsequently dropped their online course. Schilke interviewed 27 students, 19 women and 8 men. All participants lived within the service region of the institution and had access to the general support services of the college. These students registered for a wide range of courses including general education subjects such as math, English, and social studies, and also specific degree related course in business and management.

Schilke (2001) discovered that the participants dropped their online courses for a myriad of reasons. Through analysis of the interview transcripts, he identified five themes that explained student drop-out from online courses. As Schilke reviewed the literature related to his findings, he discovered Garland's (1993a, 1993b) model closely resembled four of his emergent themes. He found the reasons for drop-out almost identical to the situational, institutional, dispositional, and epistemological barriers described by Garland.

One theme noted by Schilke (2001) not identified in Garland's (1993a, 1993b) study was related to technological challenges experienced by online learners. He attributed the additional technology concerns found in his study to the technical requirements of online distance learning delivery not present in Garland's study, which involved participants enrolled in courses delivered in more traditional distance education delivery methods that included print based materials and taped media. To account for these findings, Schilke added a fifth category to Garland's model labeled technological barriers. Through this revised conceptual model, Schilke built on the work of Garland to provide a better understanding of attrition among online learners in community college settings.

Schilke's (2001) research findings showed a lack of student preparedness. Schilke recommended the implementation of learner preparedness training as a means to reduce attrition in online learning. Schilke also suggested that future research includes both students who drop-out and those who persist in order to compare their online experiences.

Another application of Garland's (1993a, 1993b) model of barriers is found in the research of Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner, and Ison (2002). Moore et al. reviewed academic transcripts from 1915 students enrolled in online classes at a large Northeastern community college. They identified a sample of students who had received an F or W grade in an online class. A survey was developed to learn more about why students were withdrawing or not successfully completing their online courses. The survey included student concerns and reasons for dropping out of synchronous campus classes such as personal problems, financial concerns, work schedule changes, and instructor-related issues. In addition, issues unique to distance learning such as technical difficulty, feelings of isolation, levels of interaction with other students, and time commitment were also included in the survey. The survey also included two open ended questions. Five hundred students were mailed the survey and seventy-one students returned a completed survey. The responses were analyzed and compared to Garland's (1993a, 1993b) framework of situational, institutional, dispositional, and epistemological barriers.

Moore et al. (2002) found the reasons reported by students for withdrawal or failing online courses fit the four categories of barriers to persistence outlined by Garland. The results of this study described students who experienced situational, institutional, dispositional, and epistemological barriers to persistence in their online courses. Student's reported that situational barriers, such as financial problems and over

extended work and family commitments, interfered with their online courses. Some reported dispositional barriers that included a dislike for the online format or teaching style, lack of motivation, and lack of time management. Institutional barriers reported were lack of information about the course format and lack of assistance accessing the course. Epistemological barriers were expressed as lack of interest in the course, lack of prerequisites for the course, and too much time and effort required by the course. The study provided support for the four barrier framework proposed by Garland (1993a, 1993b). They concluded that mature students with previous higher education experience were more likely to persist in online courses. Their research provided further insight into the nature of student attrition and persistence of community college students enrolling in online courses.

The literature on barriers to adult participation in higher education, distance education, and specifically courses and programs delivered through online learning outlined above provides a relevant context for my research questions (Cross, 1981; Garland, 1993a, 1993b; Moore, et al., 2002; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Schilke, 2001). The situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers described by Cross, provide a conceptual model to understand the attrition and persistence of adult learners in higher education. The application of this framework to include epistemological barriers by Garland and further supported by Morgan and Tam, provide additional insights to explain attrition and persistence of distance education students. Schilke extended the barrier framework with online community college students to include the technical barriers that are present with this distance education delivery method. This literature supported the need for my study of the student experience in online learning. This literature also

provided context for my research questions. To complete my literature review, I turned to a summary of several recent dissertations that have examined the community college student experience in online learning.

Research on Community College Online Students

Through my literature review, I found much of the research on community college students enrolled in online learning was reported in doctoral dissertations since the year 2000. I did not find any national studies specifically focused on community college online students. This section of the literature review examined studies of online community college students in the following categories: (a) qualitative investigation of the student experience, (b) theory building studies, (c) comparison studies, (d) satisfaction studies, and (e) studies of high risk courses.

Studies of Student Experience

Harbeck (2001) investigated Virginia community college online students through qualitative methodology to gain their perspectives about their learning experience. She studied students enrolled in liberal arts, technology, and social science courses. Data collection took place over four consecutive semesters beginning in the 1999 spring semester and concluding in the 2000 spring semester. Harbeck found the student experience was enhanced by high levels of interaction between both the instructor and other students, well managed courses, support from others at home and at work, prior knowledge that could be applied to the learning experience, the ability to be a self-directed learner, and competency in computer skills. The lack of these enhancements created a barrier to the learning experience. Harbeck also found some students regarded online courses as inferior to synchronous classes at the campus and an easy way to

complete a requirement. Additionally, students reported electronic distractions such as web surfing and interactive messaging software debilitating to their online study. She recommended further studies include questions regarding her findings.

Pedone (2003) conducted a phenomenological study of students enrolled in online education courses in a Florida community college. Data collection took place in 2003. The purpose of the study was to investigate the student experience in online education courses. Highlights from Pedone's findings were that (a) online courses provided students with convenience and accessibility to high education, (b) students needs and expectations of online learning were diverse, (c) coursework was completed independently, (d) reading was the primary learning activity, (e) technology was not a problem for participants and (f) to be satisfied with the online experience students needed to be connected to something or someone. In order to reach the full potential of online learning in community colleges, Pedone recommended further qualitative research in course content areas to determine specific student needs and corresponding support systems required.

Kennedy (2001) conducted a case study of Texas community college online learners enrolled in medical terminology courses during the 2000 fall semester. The purpose of the study was to gain awareness of the study and learning experiences of selected community college learners enrolled in online courses. Her findings suggested that a number of the participants did not have the required study skills to learn from text. Kennedy recommended further investigation to learn more about the expectations, preconceived notions, requirements, and needs of prospective online community college learners.

Theory Building Studies

Zimmerman (2002) employed grounded theory to inductively develop a theory of academic self-regulation to explain attrition and persistence of students in online courses. Data collection occurred between the 1999 and 2000 spring semesters. This study of community college and university students in Arizona found academic self-regulation most often explained student persistence and attrition. Zimmerman found the student's ability to seek help was most important to student persistence. Zimmerman recommended future study to determine self-regulatory behaviors necessary for successful completion of online courses.

Massa (2003) also found self-regulation important to student persistence. This study examined the relationship between metacognitive ability and other individual and environmental characteristics to differentiate students who persist and those who do not. Massa's quantitative study included students enrolled in online courses at two community colleges and one four-year college during the 2001 fall semester. The results of the study showed that self-regulation and self-efficacy were key factors in students who persisted in their online courses. Massa used existing models of student persistence to adapt a theoretical model for student persistence in online courses. Massa showed that students likely to persist were influenced by individual and environmental factors. Student confidence, academic experience, instructor interaction, instructional methodology were all identified as importance to student persistence. He recommended further research in the area of self-regulation, self-efficacy, and the role of internal and external motivation to student persistence in online instruction.

Motivation was the topic of research in Jamison's (2003) exploratory study of online learners in the Virginia Community College System. Jamison used motivational systems theory to predict course completion. He studied 323 adult community college students enrolled in online courses during the 2002 fall semester. The findings of the study indicated that student completion could be determined by variables such as goal activation, goal salience, multiple goals, goal alignment, emotional activation, responsive environment, human respect, feedback, and capability beliefs. Jamison recommended replication of his study with other community college populations.

Comparison Studies

Crabtree (2000) compared student performance, retention, and demographics in online and synchronous on campus courses over four semesters at a large community college in Missouri. She analyzed 1869 student records from 87 sections of 21 courses that were offered in both online and synchronous on campus formats, and taught by the same instructors. Data collection took place during the 1998 fall semester and 1999 spring semester. She found that while online students performed as well as students in synchronous on campus classes, fewer students completed their online classes. Over a third of the students in the study were enrolled in online computer classes. Crabtree posited this may have contributed to higher level of interest and comfort level with online delivery. She recommended that future studies concentrate on specific departmental course offerings such as English, history, mathematics, science, and business to gain a more focused understanding of issues related to student persistence. Crabtree also recommended future study of the types of support services that can improve retention in online classes.

York (2003) performed a study similar to that of Crabtree (2000) through an analysis of online and synchronous on campus enrollment over four years, from the 1998 spring semester through the 2002 spring semester, at a Midwestern, urban community college. He investigated the relationship of certain student characteristics (socioeconomic status, age, gender, and ethnicity) with student attrition and performance. His findings showed that in an online setting, women performed slightly better than men, and white students performed better than other ethnicities. He found that older students performed at higher levels and withdrew less often than younger students in online classes, but just the opposite results were found with synchronous campus classes. His results showed that attrition for online courses ranged from 20 to 37%, which was significantly higher than the comparison group of synchronous campus classes. Like Crabtree, he also recommended further research on the type of student support services that can increase retention and persistence in online courses. York recognized that not only are academic preparation and support services important to the success of the online student, but many issues such as technology, social interaction, and personal stressors may impact student persistence. He recommended a qualitative approach that studies the multiple dimensions of retention associated with the community college online student.

Satisfaction Studies

Aljarrah (2000) studied Colorado community college student perspectives and attitudes toward online courses during the 1999 spring and summer semesters. Sixty-nine percent of his 138 participants were women. Seventy percent of participants were adult students over the age of 25. Over 80% of the participants worked full-time. The results of the study showed students were generally satisfied with online learning and said they

would take another online course. Aljarrah also noted higher attrition in online courses compared to synchronous on campus classes. As a topic for further research, he recommended the causes of high attrition and how it might be reduced. He also suggested that further research focus on specific courses and the ways in which content is presented online.

Schultz (2001) surveyed over 500 Virginia community college students enrolled in online classes during the 2001 spring semester. The online survey included open ended questions related to student satisfaction. Students responded that convenience, flexibility, ability to work at home and at their own pace were the most appealing features of online learning. Online classes eased challenges with childcare, travel to campus, work schedules, and family obligations. Many students noted online courses offered them the only way to continue their education. Students reported that lack of interaction, rigor and pace of the course, technical difficulties, and lack of timely feedback from instructors were undesirable factors in their online courses.

Reed (2001) studied satisfaction of online students at a large community college in Illinois. He collected data in 2000. His research focused on relationships between learning style, internet success, and satisfaction of community college students taking online courses. Reed found his participants to be adult students with a mean age of 27. Female students made up 63% of the population of the study. Of the 374 students enrolled in online courses during the two quarters of the study, only 237 students or 63% completed the online courses. He found diverse learning styles among online students, and he was not able to determine whether learning styles, student satisfaction, or internet experience were reasons for the 37% attrition rate. He noted a problem with satisfaction

studies was that they typically only capture data from course completers. In order to better understand issues of persistence and attrition, Reed recommended further study include both students who complete as well as those who do not.

High Risk Courses

Bangurah (2004) conducted a quantitative study of passing and completion rates between online and synchronous on campus courses taught by the same instructor in northeast Tennessee community colleges between academic years 1998 and 2002. He found that females were enrolled in online courses in higher proportions than male students, and two thirds of the students in online classes were over the age of 23 years. Completion and passing rates were found to be lower in online courses. Bangurah found that courses with technical, mathematical, or science content had lower course grade point averages and lower course completion rates than the synchronous campus courses taught by the same instructor. He found no differences in grade point averages between courses taught synchronously at the campus and online line by the same instructors in highly text based courses such as humanities and behavioral sciences. Bangurah recommended further qualitative study that extends beyond the traditional course evaluation to investigate the student experience in online instruction. He also suggested more probative investigation to determine which academic disciplines may be more appropriate for online instruction.

Part 3 Summary

This section provided an overview of the literature and major themes on the student experience in distance education. Through a review of the early distance education literature, Cookson (1989) found quantitative studies isolating and measuring

individual traits and factors only partially explained student attrition and persistence. Cookson and Kember (1990) called for research approaches to probe the multiple dimensions of the distance education student experience. This call encouraged qualitative studies to help understand the student experience in distance education.

Through qualitative study in a number of different settings, Garland (1993a, 1993b), Morgan & Tam (1999), and Schilke, (2001) built a framework of barriers to persistence that added to an understanding of the distance education student experience. Moore, et al. (2002) added to the barrier framework through quantitative study. The literature reviews of Galusha (1997), Berge and Mrozowski (2001), and Muilenburg and Berge (2001) have also noted by first identifying student barriers to distance education, strategies can then be developed to reduce or mitigate the challenges faced by students.

The final portion of this section provides highlights of recent qualitative and quantitative studies that investigated community college students enrolled in online learning. Research studies conducted by Harbeck (2001), Kennedy (2001), Pedone (2003), and Schilke (2001) investigated the student experience through qualitative methodology. These studies have illustrated the richness in this approach to understanding issues associated with student attrition and persistence.

The quantitative studies reviewed (Aljarrah, 2000; Bangurah, 2004; Crabtree, 2000; Jamison, 2003; Massa, 2003; Reed, 2001; Schultz, 2001; York, 2003; Zimmerman, 2002) have contributed to the literature of theory building, comparison studies, student satisfaction, and high risk courses. These studies provide a partial understanding of the issues faced by the community college student enrolled in online courses. In addition, several of these studies (Bangurah, 2004; Crabtree, 2000; York, 2003) provided

recommendations for further qualitative study to better understand student issues related to student retention. Specifically, these studies recommended study of community college students enrolled in HRCs where student persistence is a particular challenge.

Conclusion

In my second chapter, I followed the recommendations of Moustakas (1994) and Wild and Ebbers (2002) to garner appropriate perspective from the literature to conduct a phenomenological study of online community college students enrolled in HRCs. This second chapter provided contextual background for my study through an overview of the community college (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Deegan & Tillery, 1985) it's student population (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005), and the evolution of online learning through an historical overview of distance education (Allen and Seaman, 2004, 2006; Carr, 2000; Curran, 1997; Dabbaggh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Dalziel, 2003; Guernsey, 1998; Matthew, 1999; Moore & Anderson, 2003; Seehusen, 2000). This portion of my literature review reflects a diverse student population in a dynamic learning environment challenged to negotiate the complexities of a new frontier offered by higher education.

At the recommendation of Wild and Ebbers (2002) and my own quest to better understand the issues at hand, I turned next to theory. My review led to two areas of literature, adult learning theory and attrition and retention theory. In this review, underpinning principles merged to provide foundations to help understand community college students learning online. First, existing theory informs us that andragogy, the study of adult learners, is grounded in principles of self-direction and transformation (Caffarella, 1993; Clark, 1993; Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 1993; Pratt, 1993). Next, attrition and retention theory referenced complex issues related to community college

online students. Personal situations, factors from the institutions, individual personalities, instructional design, and orientation to technology are among the multidimensional aspects of the online student experience. These components combine in an intricate manner to shape student outcomes (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Houle, 2004; Kember, 1989, 1990, 1995; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975).

In the final section of my literature review I focused on qualitative and quantitative studies that relate to my research problem. Through qualitative study, Garland (1993a, 1993b), Morgan & Tam (1999), and Schilke, (2001) identified barriers to persistence that impact the experience of the distance education student. Other qualitative studies conducted by Harbeck (2001), Kennedy (2001), and Pedone (2003) have added student voices to the literature to better understand issues associated with student attrition and persistence.

Quantitative studies related to online community college students have included theory building, examined course comparisons, and addressed student satisfaction and high risk courses (Aljarrah, 2000; Bangurah, 2004; Crabtree, 2000; Jamison, 2003; Massa, 2003; Reed, 2001; Schultz, 2001; York, 2003; Zimmerman, 2002). While these studies contribute to the understanding of the community college student enrolled in online courses, they also identify further areas for qualitative study (Bangurah, 2004; Crabtree, 2000; York, 2003). Bangurah, Crabtree, and York call for further qualitative study of online community college students enrolled in courses where attrition and persistence is a particular challenge.

As Moustakas (1994) recommended, through this review of literature I assessed the prior relevant studies and distinguished their designs, methodologies, and findings in

preparation for my phenomenological study. In addition, my review of literature assisted me in confirming my research approach and in identifying a focus for the possibility of new areas of knowledge. Phenomenological study proved to be an appropriate tool for me to explore my research questions. Chapter 3 follows to explain my methodology.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

Overview

In this chapter, I first explain the selection of my research design and my rationale supporting the phenomenological approach within qualitative methodology. Next, I describe the site and participants selected for my study. I follow with the details of how I collected and analyzed my data. I conclude the chapter with the approaches to trustworthiness that I used within my study.

Research Design and Rationale

My study explored the lived experiences of community college students enrolled in HRCs at one institution. Research by Cookson (1989), Kember (1989), Garland (1993a, 1993b), Morgan and Tam (1999), and Schilke (2001) noted that survey questions and brief interviews gathered data supporting only a superficial account of the student experience. They advocated for thorough, in-depth, personal interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the human experiences. Morgan and Tam found the literature on students in distance education fragmented and incomplete. They noted the research on student persistence and attrition in distance education frequently used studies that isolated and measured traits and factors leading to student attrition. These studies examined demographics, personality characteristics, learning styles, and other aspects of the individual. Morgan and Tam argued trait and factor approaches only partially explain reasons for student attrition and persistence. They advocated for inquiry that identifies the interrelated aspects of the student experience. They expressed this need by stating, “It is

in the interest of distance educators to acquire an insight into both the positive and negative factors that affect student persistence through understanding how students interpret their experiences and their circumstances” (p 99). Morgan and Tam contended the most complete way to understand the student experience is to listen to what they say it means to them.

Creswell (1998) described qualitative research as an inquiry process where the researcher builds a “complex, holistic picture [by exploring] multiple dimensions of a problem or issue” (p. 15) and reports the findings through an intricate narrative. Merriam (2002) stated qualitative researchers seek to understand “the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences” (p. 5). Methods of qualitative inquiry allow the researcher to construct a complex, holistic picture that identifies interrelated aspects of human experiences in natural settings. It is through qualitative research where students can be asked to describe their experiences and the reasons behind their decisions (Creswell, 1998; Denzin, & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2002). Such detailed information about students who share a common experience was needed to answer my research questions. My professional experience with community college online students, my personal experiences as a distance education student, and my study of the literature reinforced this perspective for me.

In searching for a research design that best fit the questions in my study, I was influenced by Merriam (2002) and Moustakas (1994). Merriam noted that while many interpretive research approaches exist, the most common are case study, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, phenomenology, and basic interpretive design. Merriam stated, “all qualitative research is characterized by the search for meaning and

understanding, the researcher as primary instrument in data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and richly descriptive end product” (p. 6).

Moustakas (1994) also identified the commonalities of qualitative research. He emphasized the value of qualitative research as a way to study the human experience not possible through a quantitative approach. He noted that the qualitative researcher is focused on the multidimensional, holistic experience that seeks meaning and essences rather than measurements and explanations. The bonds described by Moustakas acknowledge that data gathered through first person accounts of the experiences are recognized as evidence for scientific investigations. He noted the researcher must be personally committed in some way to the research questions and problem. Finally, Moustakas emphasized experience and behavior must be viewed as integrated and inseparable.

The purpose of my study was to gain a better understanding of lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs. I needed a method of study that afforded a holistic approach to examine the interrelated dimensions of the human experience. My work with community college students as a counselor and an administrator, my personal distance education experience, and my review of the distance learning literature, supported the selection of qualitative methodology for my study.

I studied the qualitative paradigm (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994) to find the best method to explore my research questions. I found phenomenological research methods of data collection and analysis the most appropriate tradition to fit the questions of my study. Moustakas (1994) described the aims of phenomenological study “to determine what an experience means for the

persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience” (p. 13). The phenomenological method allowed me to conduct an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of community college students enrolled in HRCs.

Moustakas (1994) grounded his approach to the phenomenological method in the work of the late German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Moustakas described the four major processes in phenomenological research as (a) epoche, (b) phenomenological reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) synthesis of composite textural and structural descriptions. Epoche or bracketing is the process the researcher uses to set aside preconceived ideas and beliefs about the phenomenon to understand it through the voices of participants. Through phenomenological reduction, horizontalization is applied to individual statements to give each equal value. Themes are then clustered from nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping units, or meanings of the individual experience. Individual and textural descriptions are constructed to describe what was experienced. Through imaginative variation, individual and composite structural qualities are formed to provide a universal description of how the phenomenon was experienced. Finally, the composite textural and structural descriptions are synthesized to develop the meanings and essence of the experience. I adapted the processes outlined by Moustakas as I conducted my study. I provide further detail of my methods in the section on data collection and analysis.

Site and Participants

In selecting the site for my study, I chose a college that was similar in size, demographic, and administrative structure to my own institution. This provided me with a common and familiar context and allowed me to relate my past experiences to my study. I also chose the site for practical reasons. The location was within driving distance from my home making individual participant interviews feasible.

The site of my study is a state supported community college located in the southeastern United States. The service region of the college is approximately 3800 square miles with a population of approximately 225,000. Throughout my study, I referenced the site with the pseudonym Southern Community College (SCC). SCC is situated in a suburban city with an approximate population of 40,000. The region surrounding the city is rural. SCC is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. In Fall 2003 the unduplicated credit enrollment totaled approximately 6500 students. During this term, approximately 63% of students were female and 37% were male. The average credit student was 28.8 years old. The racial make-up of students was 82% White, 12% African American, approximately 2% Asian, 2% Hispanic, and 2% other racial populations. Approximately 34% of students were matriculating in college transfer programs, 17% were pursuing occupational technical degrees, and 49% were unclassified.

During the 2003-2004 academic year, SCC conducted an internal study of distance learning students. The chief academic officer at SCC provided the report to me. The study reported that approximately 1100 students were enrolled in online courses, a 10% increase over the prior academic year. When compared to the overall student

demographics of SCC, online students tended to be more full-time, 33% compared to 26%; female, 72% compared to 63%; and older, with a higher representation of students in the 25-34 age range, 30% compared to 22%. Withdrawal rates were 15% for online courses, and 10% for the same synchronous classes held at the campus. While SCC continued to make improvements in its withdrawal rates and pass rates each year, certain course offerings were problematic.

From SCC's 2003-2004 study of distance learning classes, I identified four classes that met my definition of an HRC. These classes were Principles of Accounting I, Precalculus, Statistics, and Basic Computer Literacy. I modeled my definition of high risk courses after Pascarella and Terenzini (2005). I described the HRCs in my study as those with combined withdrawal and failure of 30% or greater as identified by the institutional research office of SCC.

In the academic year 2003-2004, online courses in Accounting I and Precalculus had exceptionally high withdrawal rates with each at 43%. The same classes offered synchronously at the campus had withdrawal rates of 25% and 20% respectively. Statistics offered online had the third highest withdrawal rate at 33%. Only 12% of students withdrew from synchronous sections of Statistics. In addition, the online Principles of Accounting I course had an exceptionally low pass rate of 24%. The same class offered synchronously at the campus had a pass rate of 54%. In the online basic computer literacy course, 40% of students withdrew or failed the course. In the synchronous campus class, 25% of students withdrew or failed the course.

In November 2005, I obtained written consent from SCC and the CSU Human Subjects Review Board to pursue my study. The approvals from CSU along with a copy

of the proposed study were filed with the SCC institutional research office. I agreed to provide the institutional research office at SCC with a copy of my completed study.

Participant Access to the Study

The participants in my study were selected purposefully in a way that allowed me to understand my research problem and answer my research questions (Creswell, 2003). Purposeful selection involved identifying participants for the study who had experienced an HRC. Creswell (1998) refers to this strategy as criterion sampling, where all individuals studied meet the criterion of having experienced the phenomenon. My study investigated the lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs. As I described in the previous section, I followed the definition of high risk courses outlined by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and selected four courses with a combined withdrawal and failure rate of 30% or greater as identified by the SCC Office of Institutional Research.

My participants were students, admitted to a community college degree program, who experienced the phenomenon through their enrollment in an online Principles of Accounting I, Precalculus, Statistics, or Basic Computer Literacy class between the 2005 spring semester and the 2006 summer semester. In addition to purposeful and criterion sampling, I also used convenience sampling. Creswell describes convenience sampling as selecting those available to participate in the study. Volunteers were asked to participate in a 60 to 90 minute interview with me on the SCC campus or nearby public meeting place. Participants also agreed to correspond with me by e-mail or telephone for follow-up purposes. Qualified volunteers were selected for the study on a first come, first served basis.

Participant recruitment was a challenge in my study, and it was necessary to obtain approval from CSU's Human Subjects Review board for two amendments to my recruitment protocol. Initially, SCC assisted me in contacting faculty teaching HRCs (Appendix A). I requested faculty assistance to invite students enrolled in their online class to participate in my study (Appendix B). Faculty members agreed to post an invitation for student volunteers on the announcement page of the course management software (Appendix C). In addition, they distributed the same invitation through e-mail to the students enrolled in their HRCs. This invitation informed students about my study and requested that interested volunteers respond to me by e-mail. All instructors confirmed with me that they did distribute the invitation as I had requested. When volunteers responded to me, I replied with a message that asked them to confirm that they met all the criteria for my study, and I requested contact information from them (Appendix D). This correspondence also included a copy of the CSU Human Subjects consent form for their review (Appendix E).

Using this method, I did not get the response from students that I anticipated. After two months, I was only able to identify three eligible participants. I requested permission to expand recruitment to students enrolled in 15 select synchronous on campus classes in accounting, math, and information technology who may have had experience with online Principles of Accounting I, Precalculus, Statistics, and Basic Computer Literacy. The protocol for participant recruitment remained the same as the original except for two aspects: (a) minor revisions were made to the instructor cover letter to add relevance for this recruitment strategy (Appendix F), and (b) instructors were asked to distribute a print invitation to participate in the study to students in their classes. The invitation contained

similar content to the electronic announcement with minor adaptations that added relevance for students with past or present experience in the targeted HRCs (Appendix G). The invitation was printed on brightly colored card stock to attract attention. In addition, I obtained permission to request the cooperation of distance education and student services administrators, counselors, and advisors to assist in recruitment by distributing printed invitations to students who had experience in the HRCs.

Approximately 350 invitations were mailed to the SCC instructors and administrators for distribution. Both instructors and administrators confirmed that the invitations were distributed to SCC students. This protocol insured that student participation remained voluntary and the instructors had no knowledge which students chose to contact the researcher to participate. This strategy proved unsuccessful and generated no volunteers for my study.

Since these additional recruitment methods did not generate the response from students that I anticipated, I obtained permission from SCC and CSU to further expand the recruitment protocol. SCC agreed to provide all e-mail addresses found in their student information system for those enrolled in online sections of Principles of Accounting I, Precalculus, Statistics, and Basic Computer Skills during the 2005 spring, summer, and fall semesters, and 2006 spring and summer semesters. Students were contacted after their HRC semester had ended. I received approval for this recruitment protocol during the 2006 spring semester. I sent an e-mail invitation to 270 HRC students from the 2005 spring, summer, and fall semesters (Appendix G). I sent invitations to an additional 124 students enrolled in 2006 spring HRCs after the semester concluded. Finally, I sent an additional 65 invitations to students enrolled in 2006 summer HRCs

after the semester ended. Each student had an SCC e-mail account, and many also provided home, business, or other e-mail addresses. I sent the invitation to all e-mail addresses provided. This recruitment protocol proved successful, and it generated a sufficient number of eligible participants to complete my study.

I obtained approval to include twenty-five volunteers for my study from the pool of qualified respondents. Creswell (1998) noted that in phenomenological study, the number of participants typically ranges from 5 to 25. As eligible volunteers responded to participate in my study, I arranged for a mutually convenient time and place to meet with them. In this meeting I explained my study, obtained their signed consent, and completed an interview that lasted 60 to 90 minutes. I was able to include all qualified volunteers as participants in my study.

Data Collection

I collected data through private, in-depth interviews with 13 community college students who were enrolled in HRCs during the five semesters between the 2005 spring semester and the 2006 summer semester. Three participants had experience in two HRCs which allowed me to collect data from 16 course experiences. Eight participants completed their HRCs, and two of the eight each completed two HRCs. This allowed for a total of 10 completed HRC experiences. Five participants withdrew or failed their HRC, and one of the five withdrew from one HRC and failed the other. I was able to hear about six different HRC experiences from these participants. All four HRCs were represented through the 13 participants and their 16 course experiences. The study reflected five participants enrolled in Principles of Accounting I, one in Precalculus, three in Statistics, and seven in Basic Computer Skills. The participants' experiences included both

completion and withdrawal or failure in each Principles of Accounting I, Statistics, and Basic Computer Skills courses. The one participant enrolled in Precalculus withdrew from the course. Eight participants were women and five were men. Participants ranged in age from the early 20s to the early 60s.

Throughout the research, I engaged in the process described by Moustakas (1994) as *epoche*, “setting aside prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (p. 85). Moustakas placed *epoche* at the center of phenomenological methodology. In this process, I consciously made an effort to put aside personal attitudes or beliefs about the phenomenon. I began this process through my researcher’s perspective in chapter 1, where I clarified and set aside my biases or preconceived ideas from the literature review and from my own experience. To facilitate the *epoche* process, I recorded my reflections before and after each participant interview, and continued throughout the data analysis process. The *epoche* process created an awareness in me which allowed me to set aside my beliefs and see the essence of the phenomenon.

The preferred method of data collection recommended by Moustakas (1994) is an in-depth, face-to-face interview. Fontana and Frey (2000) describe interviewing as “one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings” (p. 645). They go on to state that interviews are “active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results ... the focus of interviews is moving to encompass the *hows* of people’s lives (the constructive work involved in producing order in everyday life) as well as the traditional *whats* (the activities of everyday life)” (p. 646). Moustakas described the phenomenological interview as an informal, interactive process that utilizes open-ended questions designed

to evoke a comprehensive description of the person's experience of the phenomenon. Moustakas emphasized the importance of creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere to allow for a full description of the experience.

I collected data for my study through private, face-to-face interviews that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. From Moustakas (1994, p. 116), I adapted a standard but flexible protocol with broad discussion topics to guide my interview with each participant (Appendix I). I used e-mail and brief telephone conversations for follow-up with participants to add clarification and to check the data for accuracy.

I arranged for participant interviews at a mutually convenient time and place through a telephone call or e-mail correspondence. Interview times and places were confirmed by e-mail. I conducted 12 private, face-to-face interviews at the SCC campus or other nearby public meeting places convenient to participants in a location conducive to conversation. After the conclusion of the twelfth interview, I was confident that I had heard the themes of the phenomenon. To confirm that I had reached saturation, I conducted one final interview with a participant who moved out of the immediate area after volunteering for the study. I conducted this thirteenth interview by telephone, and this participant confirmed the themes voiced by other participants.

I began each interview by introducing myself, my study, and the expectations and time commitment required. I reviewed the informed consent form with participants and obtained their signatures (Appendix E). In the case of the last participant interview which was conducted by phone, the participant faxed the informed consent to me prior to the interview time. All participants were over the age of 18, thus eliminating the need for any additional consent. All participants were assured confidentiality. I used measures

such as pseudonyms for the interview transcripts and analysis documents. Such assurances were provided to allow participants a safe place to explore the phenomenon open and freely with me. In all cases, participants provided their permission to audiotape the interview. Within a day after the interview, I sent each participant brief e-mail note thanking them for their participation. In this e-mail, I invited them to share any additional thoughts. I reminded them that I would send a transcript of the interview by e-mail within three weeks.

I transcribed each of the interviews into a typed, electronic format. Within three weeks of the initial interview, I provided each participant a transcription of their individual interview. I asked each participant to confirm the accuracy of the transcript, and I provided an opportunity for them to exclude any portion of the interview. I again added an opportunity for them to share any additional information. All participants provided an e-mail response confirming the accuracy of the transcript. In some cases they offered minor corrections such as the spelling of names or references to dates. Some added an additional thought about their experience. There were no requests from participants to omit any of the data. I responded to each participant by thanking them for their participation and feedback. I also let them know that at the conclusion of the study, I would be back in contact with them to provide them with access to the final dissertation report.

Data Analysis

A distinguishing feature of phenomenological study is the method in which the data are analyzed. Moustakas (1994) developed modifications of two approaches to phenomenological data analysis, the Van Kaam method and the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen

method. I followed the Moustakas modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method for data analysis. Creswell (1998) notes this method is the most frequently used in phenomenological studies.

I adapted the four major processes outlined by Moustakas (1996, pp. 120-122) to analyze the data from my 13 interview transcripts. As noted earlier in this chapter, the four major processes are (a) epoche, (b) phenomenological reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) synthesis of composite textural and structural descriptions. As I followed the four processes outline by Moustakas, I developed a five step procedure to organize, analyze, and synthesize the individual portions of my data. The details of my data analysis follow.

First, I used the process of epoche, described in the introduction of this chapter, throughout data collection and analysis. I reviewed my records of reflections from each individual participant experience as I proceeded with my data analysis. Through this process, I consciously tried to set aside my preconceived ideas and beliefs, and opened my mind to hear each participant's voice. I completed the epoche process as I analyzed the data for each participant. To complete this first step in data analysis, I used word processing software to transcribe each individual taped interview. I entered the text into a chart that allowed for distinction between participant and research responses as well as space for coding.

Phenomenological reduction was the second phase of data analysis. I took the transcript from each participant and completed the process of horizontalization. Through this process, I identified each statement that had significance to the experience of the

participant. I assigned an inductive code to every statement. I was careful to provide equal value to every entry.

In my third step, I used a word processing chart tool to sort the coded statements. I developed the sorted statements into nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping units or meanings of each individual participant's experience. Next, I clustered these units or meanings into themes. Again, I used an inductive process to assign codes to the themes. I sorted the themes. I then used the word processing software to transport the chart to a text only format.

In the fourth step, I examined the themes that were represented by the textural descriptions of each participant's experience. Through the process of imaginative variation I constructed structural qualities for each individual experience. As suggested by Moustakas (1994), I engaged in this process, for each participant, by considering a variety of possible meanings and perspectives from the textural descriptions of the emergent themes. Through this process, I was able to identify the structures of the individual experience.

I completed the fifth and final phase of analysis for each participant by constructing a meaning and essence from the identified structures of their experience. I conducted each of these five steps for every participant in my study.

After I completed the individual analysis of each participant's experience, I turned to the method outlined by Moustakas (1994) to construct the phenomenon through a composite of the individual experiences. Following this method, I continued with the phenomenological analysis of my study by creating a textural structural composite of my findings. Using word processing software, I populated a chart with the individual

texturized structures of each participant. Inductively, I coded the individual texturized structures of all 13 participants to form the composite texturized structures. I used a sorting feature within the word processing software to identify composite structural themes. Using the process of imaginative variation, I examined and reflected on the composite themes to form the structural qualities that framed the phenomenon of my study.

Finally, as the structural qualities of the phenomenon appeared, I integrated and synthesized the composite textural structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience. My adaptation of the methods outlined by Moustakas (1994) allowed me to articulate the meaning and essence of the phenomenon of my study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Among the strategies recommended in the literature to insure trustworthiness are member checks, peer review, clarification of researcher bias, rich thick descriptions, and audit trails. Creswell (2003) recommends the qualitative researcher employ one or more of these strategies to verify the findings. Inherent in the phenomenological method described by Moustakas (1994) are a number of assurances for trustworthiness.

Credibility

I established credibility in several ways. Through engagement in the epoche process, I first clarified my personal biases related to my research. Next, I compiled a reflexive record throughout the data collection and analysis process. As a third strategy to establish credibility I conducted member checks by obtaining participant feedback. My

research design included a mechanism for participants to review transcripts of the interview and to comment on accuracy and add clarification. Moustakas (1994) identified participant feedback as a method of data verification. Data were obtained from interview transcripts and e-mail feedback. Evaluating participant feedback through these various forms allowed me to identify inconsistencies in the data and to seek clarification. In addition to these methods, peer review was also used. My methodologist reviewed each participant transcript and consulted with me throughout data collection and data analysis. This third viewpoint from my methodologist provided the needed perspective to establish credibility.

Transferability

I sought transferability in my study through rich, thick description conveyed in my findings. While I cannot ensure transferability, the written descriptions that I provide, offer sufficient detail of the methods and findings to allow the reader to determine applicability to other situations.

Dependability

I established dependability through peer review and a detailed audit trail. Peer review occurred through constructive and critical readings of my work by my CSU advisor and my methodologist as I progressed through my research project. In addition, I maintained a detailed audit notebook of all study materials, raw field notes, coded transcripts, data displays, coding process, details of thematic development, and the final report. This established an audit trail, yet another form of trustworthiness.

Confirmability

Lastly, my reflexive journal and detailed audit report also established confirmability, the degree to which the research findings are derived from the research data. Through careful journaling, recording keeping, and maintenance of my documentation, I was able to establish that my results are consistent with the data collected.

Conclusion

Upon completion of my phenomenological data analysis, I adapted the recommendations described by Moustakas (1994) to present a summary of my study. As he recommended, I returned to my literature review to compare, contrast, and distinguish my findings to that of prior research. The detailed results of my data analysis are presented next.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview

Chapter 4 presents the findings of *The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles*. The chapter is organized in four parts. My study examined the lived experience of participants who were enrolled in at least one HRC. The experience is heard through the voices of participants. In order to provide a context for the voices that describe this lived experience, I introduce the participants in my study through brief biographies in part 1. I provide a discussion about their purpose for enrolling in HRCs. I also illustrate the ways in which participants were prepared for the experience. Part 2 presents the structures that describe how the phenomenon was experienced. Through data analysis of the interview transcripts, *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* emerged as the four structures that describe the phenomenon. Through participant voices, the structures tell the lived HRC experiences. Part 3 synthesizes the four structures that describe the phenomenon. The chapter concludes in part 4 with the meaning and essence of the phenomenon, *Delicate Engagement*. The meaning and essence describes the vulnerable threads of academic and social connection that permeated the experience of HRC participants. Connection to the HRCs was fragile, and for some participants, too delicate to retain their involvement.

Part 1: The HRC Participants

The lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs is heard through the rich descriptions from the voices of participants. Brief introductions are provided as a way for the reader to become familiar with each participant. This background information provides a snapshot of how I came to know participants as they responded to my open ended request to “tell me a little about yourself.” They responded by describing personal characteristics, details about their family life, career and educational goals, and their purpose for enrolling in their HRCs. Participants are introduced in the order in which they were interviewed.

Introduction of Participants

Carly

Carly was a young woman 25 years old at the time she was enrolled in her HRC. Her family came to the United States from Puerto Rico, and she spoke proudly of her ethnic and cultural origins. She was raised in a large city in the northeast where she completed high school. She moved to a southern state after high school where she continued her education at a local community college. Carly moved to the SCC area with her husband about three years before our interview. They lived close to the campus. She worked full-time as a translator, and she also assisted her husband with their web design company. When I met Carly, she was a part-time student pursuing an associate’s degree with hopes to transfer to a university to continue her education in forensics science. She began taking classes at SCC shortly after she moved to the area.

Carly completed two online classes before enrolling in her HRC. She valued the flexibility in scheduling afforded by online courses that allowed her to expand the

number of classes she was able to take each semester. The ability to be present in the course “wherever you are” was appealing to her. The flexibility of how to learn was also an attraction for Carly. She recognized that she felt “rushed” in the synchronous course environment, and she viewed the online class as an opportunity to self-pace. She was also looking for an alternative way to learn the HRC subject.

When she enrolled in her HRC, she also registered for a humanities class that met at the campus two nights each week. Even though Carly withdrew from her HRC after approximately eight weeks, she was very enthusiastic about online learning and she planned to retake her HRC online in the future.

Keith

Keith was married and the father of two small children when we met. He lived within 20 miles of SCC, and he worked in the same town as the college. He completed an associate’s degree in emergency medical technology in the early 1980s, and he continued his education in one form or another since that time. He worked in emergency medical services for most of his career. He returned to the community college to complete a general studies degree in preparation for transfer to a university where he planned to earn a bachelor’s degree in the health care administration.

The HRC was Keith’s first online course. The flexibility of the online course appealed to him because of his unpredictable and full schedule. For Keith, the “anytime, anyplace, anywhere” nature of the online learning environment was “not only appealing, but ... calling to you.” It was perfect for his complex schedule and busy life. Keith chose the online course because of the flexibility of time and place. He said, “Just the flexibility of being able to do it when I want to do it really seemed to be a plus.” He was encouraged

by his supervisor to enroll in the HRC for professional development. He also needed the course to complete an associate's degree requirement that would prepare him to transfer to a bachelor's degree program.

During the semester that he took the HRC, he also enrolled in two synchronous courses at the SCC campus. Keith indicated that he passed the HRC, but he did not know what grade he earned. He was disappointed with his experience, and he indicated that he would not take another online course in the future.

Samantha

Samantha was married and a full-time stay at home mother when I met her. She had four children, including a 12 month old son. She home schooled her 10 year old son and 13 year old daughter. Her 16 year old daughter attended the local high school. She lived with her family in a rural area about 30 miles from SCC. Most of her prior work experience was in child development at nonprofit preschools. She earned over a hundred college credits as a traditional aged college student, but never completed a degree. Her husband, a reservist in the military, was called to active duty and had just returned from a tour of duty. During the time her husband was away, she felt vulnerable. She realized that she did not have the career training to provide for her family in the event that her husband was no longer able to support them. When her husband returned from active duty, she decided to prepare for a career field that would provide security for her family. The nursing profession met both her personal interests and financial objectives. The nursing program at SCC appealed to Samantha, and she decided to enroll in prerequisite classes. Her HRC was a course she needed to complete in order to apply to SCC's nursing program.

Online learning was the conduit that allowed Samantha to continue her education and pursue her career goals while tending to the needs of her young family. Samantha learned about online courses from a friend. She was excited about the chance to enroll in classes through a delivery method that allowed her to work toward her career goals. Samantha said, “Had this not been available, I wouldn’t be in school right now.” She believed online learning was her only access to higher education. Along with her HRC, Samantha enrolled in a second online course required for application to the nursing program. She indicated that she passed her HRC with a grade of “A,” and she was excited to take additional online courses as she prepared for her nursing program.

Alyson

Alyson was a traditional aged college student who entered SCC immediately after high school. She chose SCC because she did not want to leave home and attend a large school. The small class sizes offered at SCC were appealing to her. When we met, Alyson had just graduated from SCC with two associate’s degrees, one in general studies and one in liberal arts. Following her graduation, she planned to continue working with her current employer as an office assistant before transferring to a bachelor’s degree program to study Spanish. She expressed interest in pursuing a career teaching both Spanish and English as a Second Language. When she first enrolled at SCC, she was living with her mother and her brother in a town about 30 miles from the SCC campus. After completing several semesters at SCC, Alyson decided to move away from home to a town about 60 miles from the college. She found a new job and continued her studies at SCC.

After the change in her job and residence, the flexibility of online courses allowed Alyson to stay on track in completing her community college degree. She said, “I wouldn’t have been able to take so many classes at one time had I not been able to do the online [classes]. And, had it not been for the online classes, I probably wouldn’t have finished by now.” Alyson saw the flexibility of time and place in online courses as an opportunity. The online classes fit her life that included a new job and a substantial commute to campus. She found the flexibility of online courses “very much a necessity.” Online classes were appealing to her because she was able to condense her campus schedule to two days per week, saving her travel time and money. The combination of online and synchronous campus courses allowed Alyson to carry a full load of 18 credits each semester while meeting her financial obligations by working three days a week.

Alyson completed several semesters attending classes at the SCC campus before she enrolled in online courses. The semester when Alyson enrolled in her HRC, she carried a full load of courses that included two online classes and three synchronous classes at the SCC campus. Alyson indicated that she earned a grade of “A” in her HRC. After she completed her HRC, Alyson enrolled in several other online classes which allowed her to accelerate her degree completion and reduce her commuting expenses.

Tim

Tim postponed college immediately after high school graduation. He worked and traveled for three years prior to beginning classes at SCC. When we met, he was in his mid-twenties, single, and he lived alone. He grew up in a military family and had experienced living in many parts of the world. He became disillusioned with his secondary education during the later part of his high school program. He did not see any

purpose for continuing his studies at that time. During the three years after his high school graduation, he gained focus on his career interests and realized that a college education would be of value to him. He moved to the SCC area to be with friends.

When Tim first entered SCC, he enrolled in only a few courses at the campus. He had good experiences in his classes, and he made the decision to pursue a degree in linguistics. After exploring his options, he learned that he could complete his associate's degree at SCC and transfer to a linguistics program at a nearby university. He decided to pursue his studies full-time. During his first semester as a full-time student, he supplemented his campus course schedule with online classes to gain maximum flexibility for work options. He said the greatest advantage to online courses was the flexibility of time and place, "I've taken online courses mainly because ... I wanted the flexibility so that I would have more options for work. I had an uncertain work situation. I was looking for new work at the time. I wanted the most flexibility to fit whatever came along."

During his first semester as a full-time student, he enrolled in his HRC. In addition, he also took a second online course in English and two classes at the SCC campus. Tim indicated that he earned a grade of "A" in his HRC. After he completed his HRC, he enrolled in several other online courses.

Julie

Julie was 31 years old, married, and the mother of two active school age boys when we met. Julie attended a university for a year after her high school graduation. She lacked the self-discipline necessary to stay enrolled at that point in her life. She returned home, got married, and began her family. After her children were born, she longed to

return to school to complete her degree. Her husband's job involved shift work, and Julie was the only parent available to provide care and support for their children after school. Her sons were active in many sports, and she was an enthusiastic supporter. Julie worked as an office manager for a company located in the same town as SCC. Her commute to and from work cost her two hours each day. She skipped her lunch hour in order to get home in time to take her children to after school activities.

Initially, Julie began taking online courses offered at a community college close to her home. She successfully completed several classes toward her associate's degree. She was excited about the chance to continue her education. Julie saw online courses as her only access to higher education, "I would not be able to go back to school if it were not for online courses." She explained, "There is just no way, until the boys are away at college, or in high school and driving themselves to different places, there is just no way I would be able to take the time to do it." The flexibility of time and place offered by online learning provided Julie the access she needed to continue her education.

Some of the courses that Julie needed for her degree were not available online at her community college. When Julie learned that SCC offered the classes she needed, she said, "I was very excited. It is one more step and less time that I am going to have to take out of my schedule to actually go to a class, and try to find somebody to watch the kids, or try to skip a game." During a summer semester, she decided to enroll in two of the classes that she needed for her degree that were offered online at SCC. One of the classes was her HRC.

Julie did not complete her HRC and withdrew from the class a few days before the last day to withdraw without grade penalty. She struggled with her second online

class and barely passed the course. She was devastated by her online experience at SCC. She stayed out of school for a year before returning to her local community college to continue her studies. She said that she would not retake the HRC online nor other classes at SCC. She indicated that at some point in the future, she would make arrangements to retake the same course at the campus of the community college near her home.

Tom

Tom turned 21 years old just a few days before we met. He lived at home with his mother and father. He was active in volunteer activities with several service organizations. For three years since his high school graduation, he was a full-time student at SCC. While Tom had success in many high school honors courses, he did not have the high school academic record necessary to compete for admission to his first choice university where he wanted to study engineering. Tom was not interested in other universities. When he was not accepted to his first choice school, he decided to pursue a transfer engineering program at the local community college. During his time at SCC, Tom changed his career interests. At the time we met, he planned to attend another university to pursue a degree in nursing. He worked several different part-time jobs throughout his time at SCC.

Tom chose to take online courses to complement his campus schedule of classes allowing him extra time for work and volunteer activities. He had prior experience with one online history course. He took the class to find out if he would enjoy the online learning environment. While he passed the class, he considered the experience “more unfavorable than favorable.” Even though he was not enthusiastic about online courses, he enrolled in additional online classes. Two of the courses were HRCs in this study. “I

really wanted to take the HRC that semester.” He explained, “it was either not taking the HRC at all that semester, taking it online, or having to shift my entire schedule around, work schedule, class schedule, everything. For me, that wasn’t really that good of an option.”

Tom did not complete either of his HRCs. He withdrew from one and failed the second. He repeated one of the classes at the SCC campus. The HRCs were his last online course experiences, and he did not plan to enroll in online classes in the future.

Scott

Scott was born and raised in Europe where he completed his secondary education. When we met, he had been in the United States for approximately 15 years. He worked as a carpenter during the day and in the catering business on nights and weekends. He mentioned that he was the father of a small child. He earned his high school diploma in Europe which he explained “if you end up with good grades, it is equivalent to two years of community college.” He found that the colleges of interest to him did not accept his foreign high school credit. He enrolled at SCC with the goal of earning his associate’s degree and transferring to a university to study international relations.

Scott found the flexibility of time and place in online learning an effective and efficient way to accelerate through some of the requirements in his program of study at the community college. He enrolled in five or six classes each semester, including summers, and he was on track to complete his associate’s degree in just over a year. Online classes made that possible for him, “... it meant, instead of taking 12 or 15 credits, taking 18 or 19 credits.” He explained, “With my schedule and working during the day and sometimes on the weekend at night” online classes allowed him to “work my

schedule around it.” While Scott valued the flexibility of online classes, he was selective in choosing them. He saw online courses as an easy way to complete classes that were required but not his major interests, “I would say that online classes are for general requirement credits. I mean the system is set up that you need to have certain credits in [other courses] aside from your major interests. So online classes are an easy, efficient way of getting these credits out of the way.”

Scott enrolled in an HRC because he needed the class for his SCC degree. He admitted that he carefully selected his online classes, and he chose required courses where his interest was low. He reserved his synchronous class time for subjects where he had high levels of interest. Taking the HRC was a way to round out his schedule in an environment where he could complete a check list of tasks and move on. It allowed him the freedom and flexibility to spend his time participating and interacting in high interest classes held at the campus. Scott earned a grade of “A” in his HRC.

Kay

Kay moved to the SCC area two years before we met. She was single at the time and the mother of two children, a teenage son and a toddler daughter. She and her mother shared a house in the SCC area. She relied extensively on her mother to care for her youngest child while she worked full-time as a purchasing agent. Her company provided financial support for her education.

Since the age of nineteen, Kay had been trying to complete her college education at different community colleges. When she first began, the community college where she lived did not offer online courses. She attended school full-time at night, worked full-time in the day, and was a single parent to her young son. She described the situation as

difficult, “The hours were 6:30 to 10:30 [p.m.] four times a week. It was really tough. I got burnt out and ended up dropping out until the next school year.” After a move to another state, she tried to continue her education limiting herself to two courses a semester which required two nights a week. She also commuted to her job which also took time. She said, “I got a lot out of the courses ... it was a lot of late night studying.” She added that her role as a mother, full-time employee, and student made her life full. She explained how she tried to make progress with her education, “that is basically what I did, just at a slower pace. Then I would take a year off and go back depending what was going on in my life and my career.”

After her mother and brother moved to the SCC area, she followed them. The robust job market and closeness to her family appealed to her. She quickly found a new job in purchasing compatible with her training, experience, and career goals. While the job required a bachelor’s degree which she was lacking, her training and experience landed her the position. She was hired with the condition and expectation that she would pursue her education.

Counselors from SCC visited her company. She learned that she could complete her associate’s degree and transfer to a local university. She also learned that SCC had online courses in her program of study. She was eager to continue her education, and after a year on her job, she enrolled in two online courses at SCC. One was an HRC, the other an English composition class. The following semester she enrolled in another HRC. Kay earned “A” grades in her HRCs. She was pleased at the opportunity that online courses provided for her. She emphasized that as a single parent working full-time, online courses were her only access to continuing her education at that point in her life.

David

David had recently separated from his wife when we met. The couple lived in another area of the state. After he reevaluated his situation, he returned home to his parents who lived in the SCC area. Ten years earlier, just after high school, David was enrolled at SCC as a traditional student. At that time, he accumulated over 100 credits exploring different career options, but he did not complete enough credits in any one program of study to finish a degree. David explained that after he married, he put his education on hold to support his wife while she finished her degree. The recent change in his marital status allowed him to refocus on his educational goals. He expressed interest in completing an associate's degree with plans to transfer to a university to complete a bachelor's degree in business administration.

David moved home to live with his parents just before the start of a summer semester. He met with an SCC counselor to learn of the most efficient way to complete his associate's degree in business. As he said, "I am filling in the blanks." He hoped for a chance to repair his broken marriage and move back to his home with his wife. He wanted to remain open to reconciliation and a possible relocation, "I didn't know where I was going to be, or what I was going to be doing." Online courses were appealing to him. He believed he "could commit" to online courses. The flexible delivery allowed David the chance to continue his education regardless of the outcome of his marital relationship.

One of the courses David needed to complete his degree was an HRC. The online format of the HRC allowed him flexibility of time and place to take classes in spite of his uncertain future. He also chose three other classes that he needed for his program of study. Two of the classes were online, one was held at the college. David withdrew from

his HRC just before the last date to withdraw without grade penalty. He completed the other three classes and was pleased with his final grades. He decided that he would not reenroll in the HRC online, but rather complete the course in a synchronous section at the college campus, "I am certainly going to take that in person and not online. I don't see that class working out for me online."

Helen

When we met, Helen was a 30 year old single mother of a seven year old daughter. She was employed full-time, and she lived about twenty miles away from the SCC campus. She had educational benefits through her employer, and she was reimbursed for her SCC tuition after she completed each course. She and her significant other shared a home. Her significant other had two children who visited them every other weekend.

Helen entered a four year college immediately after high school, "I was 19 and stopped after two semesters because the timing was bad. I was not ready to be in college and I was bored. So, I joined the army and spent 5 years not going to school." When her daughter was a toddler, Helen decided to start taking courses through an online university. She used her military benefits to fund her education, but because of the high cost of tuition, her resources were exhausted before she could complete her degree. She had completed the requirements for her information technology major at the online university. Only her general education courses were remaining to finish her degree. SCC offered online courses in the subjects she needed. She learned that she could earn an associate's degree from SCC and transfer her credits back to her online university to complete her bachelor's degree. Helen was excited to know she could earn her associate's

degree at SCC while completing the requirements for her bachelor's degree. She was seeking credentials to advance her career, "I am all about how it looks on paper. I mean, being able to do a certain activity or to have a certain skill is very important, and it is necessary for what I do. But, I have already earned that, now I need the proof on paper." The online courses offered by SCC provided her the access she needed to complete her educational goals.

Helen took the HRC during a condensed summer semester when she had enrolled in three additional classes. She withdrew from her HRC "before I would get a bad grade in it." Helen planned to retake the HRC online in a subsequent semester.

Geraldine

Geraldine returned to school as a senior citizen to earn a degree in music. About to turn 62 she explained, "There is something about passing the age of 60 ... either I can do everything over again for the rest of my life, or I can have a new life. So that is what I am doing." Geraldine completed two master's degrees. For several years she taught at the university level. She always wanted to study music. SCC offered an associate's degree in music, and she decided to pursue her passion. The HRC was a program requirement for her degree.

Geraldine enrolled in the HRC during the summer semester. She had several trips planned and attending a class at the college campus would have limited her travel opportunities. She explained:

I wanted to take that course in the summer, but the summer was a time when I had a lot of plans. My mother's 90th birthday, we were going out of town for that, and I had four or five trips scheduled. But I thought I could probably work the trips and do an online course at the same time. So, I decided to try the online course. I talked to other people who had taken it, they said it was OK. And I didn't feel a

big need to come into the school during the summer. And it was nice not to have to. To be able to organize my summer's that way.

Geraldine completed her HRC with a final grade of "A." She found the course "very handy." She said, "I am glad that I did it. I learned what I needed to learn."

Sandy

Sandy was 25 years old when we talked. She referenced a significant other in her life, but did not mention any other personal or family relationships. Immediately after high school she entered a university near SCC to study anthropology. After a period of time at the university, Sandy found herself undecided about her career focus, "I didn't know quite what I wanted to do with [anthropology]. I felt like it wasn't really putting me in the direction where I wanted to go." Sandy added, "So, I took some time off and managed a restaurant. After doing that I decided that I wanted to study business. But, since all my classes had been in anthropology, I didn't really have any background." With the community college nearby, Sandy chose to attend SCC to earn an associate's degree in business administration with the goal of transferring to another college or university.

Sandy worked full-time while enrolled at SCC. At first, she only enrolled in synchronous classes at the campus. Later, she decided to try some online courses to complement her schedule, "because it worked a little bit better for me and I could do both. I was pretty happy with it." During the course of this study, Sandy moved to the west coast before she finished her SCC degree. She was pleased with the online classes at SCC, and she was still able to continue her degree. "I am still taking online classes now. I have moved to [another state], so actually all of my classes are online."

Sandy enrolled in two HRC courses during two different semesters. She had background in both courses in high school. She chose the courses in the online format because she had some familiarity with the content. She said, “I think that was easier, knowing a little bit about what I was doing.” While she did not share the specific scores, Sandy was happy with the final grades in both of her HRCs.

Summary

Brief introductions of participants were presented to add faces to the voices that tell the story of the lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs. Their purpose for enrolling in the HRCs is presented next to provide additional context.

Purpose

The four HRC courses were offered by SCC both online and synchronously at the campus. The HRC participants chose online delivery because of the flexible format. The flexibility of time and place provided by the HRCs was the primary reason participants enrolled in the online delivery. Many also discussed the appeal provided by flexibility in learning. Finally, in addition to the flexibility offered by the HRCs, some participants chose the course because it was a convenient way to complete a less interesting program requirement. A discussion of the purposes of the HRC participants follows.

Flexibility of time and place

The online nature of the HRCs offered participants the flexibility of when and where they completed the class. The flexibility of time and place took on different meanings for participants. The opportunity to take an online class without physically going to the college campus at a fixed time was the only opportunity some participants had to continue their education. For others, this flexibility meant they could accelerate

their degree program by taking more classes each semester. Some participants found HRCs convenient because these classes afforded them more choices in their campus classes, the chance to travel, the ability to maintain unpredictable work schedules, or fulfill other commitments that occurred within a fixed time and place. They described (a) access, (b) acceleration, (c) convenience, and (d) geographic mobility as the major benefits. Following is a discussion of what the flexibility of time and place meant to HRC participants.

Access. Online courses provided the access needed for some participants to continue their education. Samantha, Julie, Kay, and Helen found access to higher education when the HRCs they needed for their degree programs were offered online. They shared that online courses were their only access to higher education. Without this option, these participants would not have been able to pursue their education at the particular point in time.

Samantha's access to higher education hinged on the availability of online courses. When Samantha learned about online learning from her friend, she recognized an opportunity to get an early start on her plans to enroll in nursing school while tending to the needs of an infant and three growing children. Samantha lived almost an hour from SCC. While her husband was willing to care for the children, he did not arrive home from work in time for her to travel to evening classes at the campus. She stated, "Had the online learning not been available, I wouldn't be in school right now. I wouldn't. There is no way." When Samantha enrolled in online classes her priority was to be available to her children. The online courses created the access for Samantha to get started in her education at an earlier point in time. She was able to continue home schooling her 10 and

13 year old children and provide the care for her one year old baby. The access provided by online learning meant “everything” to her.

Julie also felt that online courses were her only access to higher education. She chose to take online courses because she was not able to go to campus to take classes. Her days were filled commuting two hours each day to and from her full-time job. She worked through her lunch hour so she could leave an hour early to return home to meet her two sons and take them to their after school activities. Campus classes in the evening were not an option for Julie because her husband worked a night shift, and he was unable to assist her with the children. The flexibility of time and place provided by online classes allowed Julie to juggle the competing responsibilities of her family, her full-time job, a household, and continue her education.

As a single parent of a teenager and a toddler and a full-time employee, Kay also believed that online courses were her only access to higher education. For more than ten years she had been trying to complete a college degree. She had taken several campus classes at different colleges over the years, and she was well aware of the demands this new commitment placed on her life. Kay explained:

I think right now, if I were to try and go back, I couldn't do that same thing. Not with working full-time and having a 17 month old child, and a fifteen year old son, and being a single mom. I couldn't, I wouldn't go back to school right now if I had to go and take classes four nights per week.

She did not want the pursuit of her education to take away from her time with her children. Online courses allowed her the ability to spend quality time with her children and still complete her course work, “I can stay up until one o'clock in the morning if I want to and not sacrifice time with my kids at all.” Online courses allowed the time and effort that she spent on her education to be “seamless” to her children. Kay reiterated that

without online courses “it just wouldn’t be an option to continue my education right now.” She stated, “Online courses are the only reason I am going back to school right now. It is allowing me the opportunity to get my degree.”

Online courses provide the access Helen needed to earn her degree. Helen stated, “If it weren’t for the online courses, there is no way I would get a degree. If I can’t get a degree, then I can’t secure a good future for my child and myself. So, this works out well for me.” The flexibility of time and place in online classes allowed Helen to read a story to her child, tuck her in bed, put on her own pajamas, and work on her classes a few hours each night.

Samantha, Julie, Kay, and Helen enrolled in the HRCs as part of their degree program. They believed the online delivery of the HRCs was their only way to complete these program requirements. The flexibility of time and place afforded by the HRCs allowed these participants a unique point of access to higher education.

Acceleration. Alyson and Scott found the flexibility of time and place in online learning an effective and efficient way to accelerate through some of the requirements in their degree programs. Both participants were able to advance the pace of their degree programs by completing requirements through their HRCs.

The flexibility the HRC and other online courses enabled Alyson to stay on track in completing her community college degree after a change in her residence and job that substantially increased her commute to SCC. She said, “I wouldn’t have been able to take so many classes at one time had I not been able to do them online. And, had it not been for the online classes, I probably wouldn’t have finished by now.” With a full-time job and a commute to campus of over an hour, Alyson found the flexibility of online courses

“very much a necessity.” She also believed she was “more at risk” for campus classes because with her commute and her job, she would sometimes “miss classes” that were held at the campus. An added advantage for her was that, “you can’t miss an online class, you can always get the work done.”

Scott was motivated to complete his associate’s degree program as quickly as possible and continue his education at a nearby university. He worked two jobs to provide for his family while taking five or six classes each semester, including summers. He planned to complete his associate’s degree in just over a year. Online classes made that possible for him. “It meant, instead of taking 12 or 15 credits, taking 18 or 19 credits.” During one semester, he was able to take six classes, four at the SCC campus and two online, “with my schedule and working during the day and sometimes on the weekend at night” the online classes allowed him to “work my schedule around it.”

The flexibility of time and place allowed Alyson and Scott to accelerate their program of study by taking more credits each semester. The availability of the HRCs and other online courses enabled them to reach their academic goals at an earlier point.

Convenience. Several participants enrolled in their HRCs because of scheduling convenience. Keith, Carly, Tom, and Tim combined campus and online classes as they progressed through their degree programs. Each had the opportunity to take the HRC at the campus, but they chose the online format to ease the demands on their fixed work and class schedules.

Keith was attracted to online courses because of the convenience afforded by the “anytime, anyplace, anywhere” features of the classes. They were perfect for his complex schedule and busy life that included a job with long hours and an unpredictable schedule.

Keith shared, “Online would be appealing, not only appealing, but it is calling to you.”

Keith found the flexibility of online learning “HUGE! For me that was huge. Flexibility, flexibility, flexibility, flexibility! To do things when I wanted to, how I wanted to, where I wanted to. Flexibility!”

Carly echoed Keith’s sentiments. She found the ability to be present in the course “wherever you are” appealing. Online classes allowed her to limit the number of evenings that she had to attend classes at the SCC campus.

Tom needed to maintain a full-time student status and work part-time for practical reasons. He also wanted to honor his commitment to a robust schedule of volunteer activities. The online options in two HRC courses allowed him to build a class schedule that yielded to all of his obligations. Tom said, “It was either not taking the HRC course at all that semester, taking it online, or having to shift my entire schedule around ... work schedule, class schedule, everything.” He added, “For me, that wasn’t really that good of an option. So I took the online course because I really wanted to take [the HRC] that semester.” The online option appealed to Tom because “it doesn’t require attendance. You don’t have to be in a classroom at a certain time, at a certain place.” He explained, “I can go online at one o’clock in the morning after I get off from work and start working on it then.”

Tim found the flexibility of time and place a convenience for him. He explained:

I wanted the flexibility so that I would have more options for work. I had an uncertain work situation. I was looking for new work at the time. I wanted the most flexibility to fit in whatever came along ... the structure was loose enough that there wasn’t a set time that I had to come down here, because it is kind of hard to get here. So, it’s the completely, 24 by 7 hours, and take your pick. Rather than you have 3 hours or 5 hours in a week and here is what they are.

Online classes allowed Tim the ability to look for a new job without concern for his course schedule. In addition, transportation to the campus was a challenge for Tim, and online courses reduced his number of trips to SCC.

Geographic mobility. David, Geraldine, and Sandy found themselves in positions where they needed geographic mobility. David enrolled in his HRC because it was a requirement to complete his program of study. The online format was appealing to him because of his tentative marital status. Recently separated from his wife, he wanted to remain open to reconciliation and a possible relocation, “I didn’t know where I was going to be, or what I was going to be doing.” He said he “could commit” to an online course. The online format of his HRC allowed him flexibility of time and place to take classes in spite of his uncertain future.

The online HRC features attracted Geraldine to enroll because of summer travel plans. She needed the class to complete a general education requirement for her degree. The online format allowed her to complete a degree requirement and enjoy her summer travel.

Sandy initially enrolled in online classes to maximize scheduling options for school and work. As she neared completion of her degree, she moved out of state. During this time she completed her second HRC. “We were moving and I wasn’t sure where I would be and when I would be leaving. So it gave me huge flexibility. And this is awesome to still be able to take them online.” The flexibility of time and place afforded by her HRC and other online classes enabled her to continue her progress toward her associate’s degree even though she moved across the country.

The flexibility of time and place offered by the HRCs afforded participants access to higher education, the ability to accelerate their degree programs, scheduling convenience to accommodate class and work schedules, and geographic mobility. The HRCs also afforded participants flexibility in their learning.

Flexibility in Learning

While the initial attraction to the HRCs was the flexibility of time and place, participants also expressed additional preferences for this delivery mode. The online format allowed participants the flexibility to control the pace and content of learning and the ability to use their own learning style. It also it provided a shield that protected participants from embarrassment as they went about learning new content.

Control of learning: Pace and content. The online format allowed participants to control the pace and content of their learning. They were able to quickly advance through material they knew and spend more time on content that was less familiar. They were able to work ahead in the courses which freed them for personal obligations throughout the semester. Tim described the flexibility in learning afforded by online courses:

... a lot of times in coming into an actual physical class, I feel that it is more time devoted to the subject than I need ... So it has kind of meant that I can devote as much or as little time as I need to the topic. And how much time I need to spend on certain specific topics. Just like, am I getting this, or not, and I can go back. And that has really been the most attractive point about online courses ... the flexibility allows you to pick and chose ... make your own choices about how you learn and get to the goal.

The online learning environment allowed Tim to customize his learning to fit his own needs. As he said, "I do things better my way." Helen said that she experienced the flexibility in the way she learns and what she chooses to pay attention to. She said, "I experienced that from the very start ... you read what you need to know, research what

you don't know ... you didn't waste time on the things you do know." David also found the ability to self-pace a benefit of his online courses. He provided a clear example of what this flexibility meant to him, "Some things I really want to rush, other things I really don't. Inside my time allotment, I can do it whenever I wanted, and I would do it as much or as little as felt I needed." Tom also acknowledged that the online classes, "saves me the time of spending three hours in a classroom when I didn't need to be spending the full three hours in subject matter that I already knew." Julie was another participant who liked the ability to "make up my own hours ... to not have to sit through three hours of classroom for something that I already got."

Kay pointed out another benefit afforded by the HRCs was the ability to control learning, "there were a lot of positives for procrastination or for catching up." She experienced illness during her HRC. She explained how the ability to self-pace aided her. "There was a lot of sickness and a lot of things where I couldn't focus on classes. Maybe I went a week without picking up my books because it was just not conducive to doing my online course."

Geraldine, Alyson, and Samantha appreciated the opportunity to work ahead in the course. Geraldine found this aspect particularly helpful as she traveled during the summer. She explained that in some of her assignments, "I got so far ahead, that I didn't even hand them in. I waited until a little closer to the time to hand it in." This flexibility allowed her to advance in the course when she had time and "have some work done, because I am going to San Diego next week. But then when I get back, I can just send in the assignment." Samantha used the flexibility to work around the needs of her family, "My baby is sounding raspy again. I don't know that next week I'm not going to be by

his bedside and completely unable to do my work. So I do try to stay ahead so I have that cushion.” The ability to self-pace learning the content added to the flexibility and efficiency of the HRC participants’ learning experience.

Learning styles. The flexibility of how to learn was also appealing to Carly. She found her HRC subject a challenge. She believed might be able to teach herself the subject, “I have the text, I have whatever online assistance there is through this class. They also have different tutoring sites and aides to assist you. And I thought maybe I can try to teach myself a different method.”

Alyson found her online classes meant, “more than the campus classes because you have to force yourself to learn to find different ways of understanding things.” Alyson realized the experience required her to think differently about the content in order to understand. She explained the HRC required her to “think laterally, and sideways, and think of a better way to understand something.”

David agreed that learning online is conducive for diverse learning styles, “I think another advantage is that people learn differently. And for some people, it is really hard to learn in the classroom environment. At least now we have a possibility for a different type of learning to occur.”

Social shield. Carly recognized that she felt “rushed” in the synchronous course environment. She viewed the online class as an opportunity to self-pace. The online environment protected her from the social embarrassment of asking questions in front of her peers when she didn’t understand. She was also looking for an alternative way to learn her HRC content.

David also admitted that the online environment provides a shield against uninteresting or embarrassing social situations that can occur in a synchronous campus class. He explained, “Sometimes, in a classroom environment I am bored with the other students. You know, don’t waste my time with your dumb questions here in class. We need to move on to other, more important things.” He went on, “... other times, I really didn’t get it, and I really need to sit down, and I need to get ME time to go over that again.” David was candid when he said, “A lot of times I am embarrassed, and I don’t want to be like, didn’t get that, oh, didn’t get that either.”

Selectivity. Some participants indicated that they made discrete choices about which classes they were willing to take online. While Scott valued the flexibility of online classes, he was selective in choosing them. He saw online courses as an easy way to complete classes that were required but not major interests, “In general, online classes are for general requirement credits. You need to have certain credits in [subjects] aside from your major interests. Online classes are an easy, efficient way of getting these credits out of the way.” Scott selected his online classes because they were required, but not subjects where he had a passionate interest. Scott indicated political science was one of his interests. He said he would not consider taking that subject online:

I wouldn’t. I would never do that! It is just not engaging enough. Like literature, I mean, I can’t understand why people take a literature class online. Unless they just need to get it done as a requirement. But if you really have an interest in literature, you want to sit down with other people and discuss and see what they are pulling out of that column or out of that essay. And the same with political science.

Scott viewed taking his HRC as a way to round out his schedule in an environment where he could complete a check list of tasks and move on. It allowed him the freedom and

flexibility to spend his time participating and interacting in high interest classes at the campus.

Geraldine offered a similar view. She explained there are some types of courses that she would not consider taking online. As an example, she said that she would not take a history class online:

“NEVER. NEVER! You don’t want to take history alone! You want to discuss what is happening. Who were the Trojans? You know, where was Troy on the map and what do we know about it. Who are the famous people who studied it and what do you think about it I want a lively professor. And a lot of good questions. And I want somebody getting my mind excited and interested.”

Sandy also offered her perspective. She planned to major in accounting after transfer to a university, “because it will be my major and because it will be material that is completely different ... I am just really am excited to have it in person so I can ask questions in class.” She added “I don’t think I would feel as comfortable taking classes that I didn’t really know anything about, and I feel that in person, you retain it better.” Sandy had background in both of the HRCs that she completed and felt comfortable taking them online because of this foundation. She said that her HRCs were “just general education requirements.” Unlike courses in her degree major where retaining the knowledge was essential, she viewed these courses as less important.

Participants chose their HRC classes for different reasons. The primary purpose for most was the flexibility of time and place. As they spoke about their purpose for enrolling in the online format, additional reasons for their choices surfaced. Along with the flexibility of time and place, participants found the online format of their HRC provided options to pace the course content and alternatives for different types of learners. A few admitted the online environment provided a social shield to learning

unfamiliar and new content. Some participants were candid about how they chose online classes such as their HRC. They indicated they would not enroll in an online class where they desired high levels of engagement or where content related to their major interests.

The participants have been introduced through a brief biography. Their purpose for enrolling has also been discussed. Their preparation for their HRCs is also important to an understanding of their experience. The next section will discuss the ways in which participants were prepared for the HRC experience.

Preparation

Without exception, all participants reported they were academically prepared for the HRCs. According to SCC's course catalog, the HRCs required a satisfactory reading and writing score on the college placement test and completion of second level algebra. Each participant had demonstrated the requisite reading and writing skills prior to enrolling in their HRCs. All participants enrolling in HRCs with math prerequisites exceeded the entry requirements. While some were more comfortable in the online environment than others, each participant had the basic computer literacy to access their online courses. The discussion in this section extends beyond the academic prerequisites required for participants to enroll in their HRCs. It speaks to the preparedness of participants in other ways as they started their HRCs. Following is a description of the course and experience background of participants, their participation in SCC's orientation programs, and the timing of their enrollment as these pieces relate to the overall preparation of HRC participants.

Course and Experience Background

Sandy, who enrolled in two HRCs over two different semesters, had high school classes in the same subject. While the level of the HRCs expanded on what she had learned in high school, the background in the specific content area was useful for her. She said, “And that is one of the reasons I chose to take HRC online. I knew I had taken it before and done pretty well. I think it was easier, knowing a little bit about what I was doing.” Sandy also had related work experience that provided foundation for her HRC online learning. She had taken other online courses and she understood the navigation of the course management system.

Kay, like Sandy, had extensive work background that prepared her for both of her HRC classes. She had extensive knowledge in one of the subjects and her work environment interfaced with the other on a daily basis.

Alyson came to her HRC with strong conceptualization skills that she developed through an extensive math background. She found these skills helpful in processing the information required in her HRC, “I think that a good math background helps with the conceptualization of how numbers work.” The background gave her confidence to excel in her HRC.

Tim also stated that he had a strong math background with a “pretty good grasp of Algebra two,” a course prerequisite for his HRC. In addition to being academically prepared for the course, he was also technically prepared. The online environment was comfortable for Tim, “I am really big into computers. I’ve always been kind of online. So getting into [the course management system] and doing stuff in [the course management system], wasn’t any big shock for me.” While he had never used the online course

management program before, and he didn't participate in any formal orientation, the navigation was intuitive for him. Tim said he "got on and just toyed around with it."

Scott prepared himself for online learning by first taking a one credit online class to see how he would adapt to the learning environment. The class gave him a sense of the independence and self-direction required. This experience also allowed him to become acclimated to the course management system and related technology required for online learning. While Scott did not have extensive background in his HRC, his life experience provided him some exposure to most of the topics that were covered in the class. When he chose to enroll in the HRC, Scott was confident he would be able to successfully complete the course.

The course background and practical experience these participants brought to their HRC gave them confidence to progress. Attendance in the orientation programs for online learners offered by SCC provided another opportunity for participants to prepare for their HRC courses. A description of these programs follows along with participants' perceptions.

Orientation Programs

SCC provided an orientation for students new to online learning. The session reviewed the course management system and addressed general information about the requirements of an online course. Samantha, Alyson, Scott, and Kay each made the effort to attend a session, but they did not find the information useful. Samantha said that she had completed the orientation program offered online. She was frustrated to have to spend the time to drive to campus for the same information:

I did have to go in for an orientation. But at that point, the orientation was not useful. I was frustrated that I spent the time driving into the college to go to it ...

because there is an orientation on [the course management system] itself, that talks you through it. So I went through that before I went to the face-to-face orientation.

Geraldine did not attend the session at the college, but printed out the tutorial available online. She said, “I printed out this huge long thing and then hardly ever used it. It really sort of took care of itself. But at least it was there if I needed it.” Geraldine found that once she got into the course no one noticed that she did not attend the mandatory orientation, and it did not seem to matter.

Some of the HRCs provided an orientation session specific to the class and several participants took advantage of the opportunity. Following is a description of their experience.

Orientation to Course

The participants who attended course specific orientation sessions reported that they found these sessions helpful. In the course orientations, they met their instructors, reviewed the course requirements, and had their general questions addressed. Alyson and Kay indicated they took advantage of these sessions and found them to be a valuable use of their time.

Alyson recognized the importance of taking advantage of the resources available to her at the college as she prepared to take the course. She completed the online tutorial that introduced the course management system. As noted before, she attended the general orientation offered by the college for online learners as well as a session that focused specifically on her HRC. This orientation was offered by the HRC instructor. Alyson appreciated the opportunity to become acclimated to the HRC and make a personal

connection with the instructor. This grounding gave her confidence. Even though she was “a little nervous at first” she said to herself, “I can handle this.”

Kay was another HRC participant who took advantage of all of the orientation programs. She participated in the orientation to online learning by completing the online course management system orientation and by attending the required campus presentation. Kay valued the orientation designed specifically for her HRC. She appreciated the time the instructor spent with her before the class began. She said the instructor “really made sure that the online course was for you.” She said the instructor “really questioned” and showed a “lot of concern.” Kay found that the online orientation to her HRC helped her set realistic expectations for the course. “Originally, I didn’t think it was going to take a lot of time.” In the orientation session Kay sat with her instructor who told her what to expect which “put things in more perspective for me.”

Late Start

David and Helen both got a late start in their HRC. These participants completed their class registration a few days after the start of their HRC. The orientation sessions had passed, and they were not able to benefit from them.

David indicated that the late start left him feeling behind in the course. He explained, “I was pretty excited about the class. I had signed up for it during the period where classes had already started but you could continue to enroll.” He missed the orientation meeting to the class and met with the instructor individually. He said that because he enrolled late and “had a lot on my plate ... it just took a lot of extra work to catch up.” As the course progressed, he realized just how difficult it was to catch up. The late start in the HRC was detrimental to David.

Helen was another participant who registered late for the course. She said, “I registered after the orientation date. So, I missed orientation.” She added that the instructor allowed her to meet individually and “went over the course requirements with me.” She indicated that the instructor let her know the expectations for the course and that “there was a lot that was going to be involved.” Helen realized that her late start put her at a disadvantage, “I think had I started the course, had I signed up for the course, started the course earlier, and started the reading earlier, I would have been better prepared, and it wouldn’t have been such a shock to me.” She added, “I just couldn’t catch up.” The late enrollment of HRC participants put them at a disadvantage. They were left feeling unprepared and behind as they started their course.

HRC participants expressed that some background in the content, either through prior coursework or work experience, was helpful in the preparedness for the course. Participants who attended the general orientation session did not find the information provided helpful. Participants enrolled in HRCs with course specific orientation sessions found the information helpful, and they valued the chance to get to know their instructors and learn about their expectations. Late starts in the HRCs placed participants at a particular disadvantage.

Part 1 Summary

The first part of chapter 4 provided a context for participants’ voices through brief biographical introductions. Their purpose for enrolling in the HRCs provided an additional perspective as a way to understand their experience. The preparation of participants for the HRCs also impacted their experience in ways that unfold in the

structural descriptions of the phenomenon. The second part of this chapter details the four structures that emerged through data analysis.

Part 2: HRC Structures

The HRC structures presented in part 2 of this chapter describe how the phenomenon was experienced. Four structures emerged from my data analysis. *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* defined the four structures that frame the phenomenon. As participants shared their experience, their voices told of how *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* formed their lived experience in HRCs. This section of the chapter provides a detailed examination of each structure.

Isolation

Introduction to Isolation

Imagine that you are in a classroom without space. There are no walls, no windows, no desks. There is nothing to touch or smell; the classroom is invisible. Imagine the classroom without light. There are no smiles; there are no gestures; there is no movement. There is nothing to see. The classroom is dark. Imagine the classroom without sound. There is no music; there is no laughter; there are no voices. There is nothing to hear. The classroom is silent. You know there is an instructor somewhere in the classroom, but the presence is phantom like. There are no signs of other students. The classroom feels barren. It is cold. It does not feel real. You feel abandoned, alone, adrift. What becomes real to you is your own sense of *Isolation*. Imagine the classroom I just described, and you can begin to understand the experience of the HRC participants.

Isolation is the first structure that emerged from my data that describes the classroom experience of HRC participants. *Isolation* describes the loneliness participants felt as they experienced their HRC. It illustrates the vacuum of the HRC classroom, the lack of student-instructor interaction, and the void in student-to-student connections. Participants found little support for their learning within their HRC classroom, and they were forced to turn to outside resources when they needed help. *Isolation* tells of the participants' struggle to find ways in which to connect with their HRC and how to make the experience feel real. *Isolation* conveys the feelings of participants. They felt alone, adrift, abandoned, all by themselves. Their feelings led to their sense of *Isolation*.

Four dimensions of the HRC experience contributed to the structure of *Isolation*: (a) the surreal HRC classroom, (b) the lack of student-instructor interaction, (c) the void in student-to-student connections, and (d) the possibility of a different experience. Without a place to go, interaction with their instructor, or classmates to share the experience, HRC participants found themselves isolated and looking outside of their HRC for resources and relationships to support their learning. The voices of participants portray the *Isolation* of the HRC experience.

Surreal HRC Classroom

The surreal nature of the HRC classroom provided the venue for the *Isolation* experienced by participants. The HRC classroom was a virtual one, with no tangible elements. To HRC participants, it was a conceptual experience. They were challenged to visualize their HRC classroom as a real place. They struggled to identify with a classroom that lacked physical space and real people. They had difficulty connecting their live world to their virtual world.

Tom provided a vivid account of how he perceived his HRC classroom as “surreal.” He said it was “just the psychological issue” of not having a physical classroom or a live instructor:

What class? What professor? What assignments? ... The online courses seem almost surreal. In that, oh, I’ve got a course that I don’t have to go in and do anything for. It is not a physical course ... the professor kind of ... nonexistent. It’s oh, I’ve got to go online, I’ve got to look at my computer, an inanimate object, and it is going to tell me what assignment to do, versus my professor saying, all right, here is the assignment, here is what you need to do. I want it done by this date and this date. It is the mentality of hey, that inanimate object has no control over me. But that professor has control. The aspect of psychologically, seeing the professor, having them shake their finger at you for not turning in an assignment, versus reading a text message saying ‘oh why haven’t you turned in the assignment’ it is a bit different ... [it] is a lot easier to learn from a human being than it is to learn from a computer. The interaction wasn’t the same.

Tom saw physical space necessary to interact with others. He valued being able to see and talk to other people, “to have a professor say, ‘oh, you are actually here, or hey Tom, why weren’t you there today in class?’ Whether that question is coming from my professor or from my friends in class ...” The face-to-face interface with others in the classroom made Tom feel recognized, and if he was absent, he knew, “I was missed.” Knowing someone cared about his classroom presence was important to Tom. He needed a physical space to feel acknowledgement from his instructor or his classmates. Without it, Tom felt as if he was forgotten and alone. He said:

I think because I did not have that interaction, with the students, because I did not have that same physical interaction with my professor, it tended to make me lose interest in the course ... I wanted to withdraw myself from that course as soon as possible.

Samantha, like Tom, recognized the difficulty in perceiving the virtual environment as real, “I think that it is very easy to forget that you have to do school ... if

you are not thinking about it. Because you are not going anywhere ... I don't feel like HRC is a real class."

Lack of physical space was just one element that contributed to the surreal nature of the HRC classroom. Participants did not sense a human presence within their HRCs. They viewed themselves alone in a class without an instructor. Alyson described her HRC, "It's not the same as being in a regular class, you don't have a teacher." Carly and Samantha made similar comments when they described their HRCs. Both used the same words, "you don't have a teacher."

Without a physical space and a human presence, the HRCs felt surreal and sterile to participants. In fact, for Tim, the HRC felt so empty and barren that he struggled to remember his experience:

What stands out for me is just how little I remember about it. The fact that it doesn't stand out, stands out for me. I don't usually forget about things this much ... what it kind of says to me, is that I can't really remember anything about HRC except my own kind of confusion and having to piece it all together myself ... it's almost like I never took it ... except for the fact that I still have some concepts. There wasn't really much to it ... it kind of felt like an independent study ... and a little too much. Not only was it not in a classroom, it almost wasn't online either.

Tim completed the class within a year of our interview, yet his memory of the experience was less than a figment of his imagination. It was almost like it never existed for him. He remembered little but his own sense of *Isolation* as he wandered through the course confused and alone.

Without space, without faces, without voices, participants found themselves in a place where the only bridge to their real world was a computer that Tom described as, "an inanimate object." The lack of tangible space and physical human presence created a surreal environment that placed participants in a vacuum leaving them feeling alone. The

Isolation intensified as participants struggled to establish relationships within the surreal classroom.

Lack of Student-Instructor Interaction

Participants longed for interaction with their instructor. They viewed the relationship with their instructor, not only critical to their learning experience, but the lifeline to escape the *Isolation* of their surreal and barren classroom. Participants were disappointed when they discovered the interaction with HRC instructors was limited. The *Isolation* felt by participants intensified when HRC instructors were unresponsive to individual e-mail or when they did not participate or respond on the classroom discussion board. Participants were sensitive to the frequency and the way in which instructors interacted with them. The virtual climate turned cold when the HRC instructors replied cryptically or abruptly. In this chilling environment, participants had difficulty establishing a relationship with their instructor. This lack of student-instructor interaction forced participants further into *Isolation*.

Keith missed the interaction with his HRC instructor. He viewed the relationship with an instructor as essential to learning. He believed it was within the instructor-student relationship where the questions “why is this important, how does that apply, how or why that works” were answered. He felt cheated in his HRC when he did not have the opportunity to have these questions answered. He valued his campus classes where “there are other people around you to talk to, you can figure out what is going on.” When he entered his HRC, he was distressed by the lack of student-instructor interaction. He described his communication with his HRC instructor as “none at all.” On three

occasions he tried to contact his HRC instructor, but he never got a response. Without the interaction and support from his HRC instructor, Keith felt abandoned:

It is kind of like leaving home for the first time and Mom and Dad aren't going to help you ... you learn it on your own ... you figure it out ... you are on your own. And that is how I felt, that was going on ... you were on your own. Good luck! There is no one there to help you.

Keith found the lack of responsiveness from the instructor unacceptable and something that “sort of cut the tie of student and instructor relationship.” It caused him to pull back and not rely on his HRC instructor for support in the course. Keith summarized the void in the relationship with his instructor as “No interaction. No communication. It was, how do you say, it was one way? Because, in order to have communication, it has to be two [ways].” He felt abandoned and “finally just gave up” on the hope of having any relationship with his instructor. He said “[I] basically did my assignments, turned them in, got my grade, and went on.” When Keith’s instructor did not provide feedback or interaction, he was without a lifeline to escape his feelings of *Isolation*. These feelings caused him a deep sense of frustration, “it was just another sense of frustration. I don’t have time to be frustrated with [the instructor]. I am frustrated enough on my own. I don’t need someone else’s help to get me frustrated.”

David shared Keith’s feelings of frustration and sense of *Isolation* as he described the lack of instructor interaction in his HRC. “I don’t feel like there was an instructor presence. I don’t feel like there was anything that I was learning from the instructor. The instructor was simply there as a web administrator, or as a grader.” He described the interactivity in the class as “ZERO!” He said, “I felt it was definitely a big chasm in communication.” David went on to say, “if there was to be an instance where I needed to contact my instructor, it was me presenting a specific question, looking for a specific

answer.” He added, “The replies that I received didn’t leave me feeling like my question was answered. Instead, I felt like I was being referred to the learning lab.” David went on to describe his experience when he went to the learning lab:

There were a number of times that I was at SCC, and went into the HRC lab, and there wasn’t anybody there. And I was like, why am I coming all the way up here, why am I coming 20 minutes from home to sit down, to make time, when there is going to be nobody here. There were even times when I had contacted my (HRC instructor) and said I am going to come up at this time to get instruction ... will somebody be there? This is after I had come up like 2 or 3 times, and nobody was there, and they were like, oh yea, somebody will be there ... and then I went up once and nobody was there! And I was like, whatever! I had given up on that!

David felt angry when he made the effort to create a human bridge to his virtual classroom by visiting the campus learning lab and found no one there to assist him. The lack of interaction and responsiveness from his HRC instructor undermined his efforts, leaving him with nothing but his own sense of isolation. Like Keith, he felt abandoned, cheated, and frustrated.

Tim was disappointed by the lack of interaction with his instructor as he talked about his HRC. “I don’t remember much engagement on the part of the instructor. It was kind of like here are the sections of the book, and you are going to have a certain number of projects, here are the projects. Go get um!” He added, “There wasn’t really any kind of bonding or anything. I didn’t know anybody. I don’t remember talking to the instructor at all.” Tim enjoyed the interaction in his campus classroom experiences, and he expressed his regrets about his HRC, “I sometimes wish that I was in a seated class.” Tim was reminded of how isolated he felt every week throughout the semester as he entered a classroom where a campus section of his HRC was taught:

I remember coming into [campus class], seeing them erase the HRC stuff on the board and every time I saw that, just this little thing clicked in my mind ‘that looks a lot more helpful. I wish I was in that class’ ... I really found myself kind

of wanting the class so I could get everybody else's questions. ... It might have been easier if I could have taken the problems that I was having trouble with and bounce them off the instructor.

Tim felt the void of interaction with other students and his instructor. He expressed his disappointment when he realized the missing element diminished the richness of his HRC experience.

Sandy was frustrated by the lack of feedback in her HRC, and she described the interaction as "minimal." She said while the instructor would "answer questions if they were asked ... I didn't ever get any of my stuff back ... I knew it was right ... but that was one thing I thought was lacking." She went on to say the instructor "didn't return your documents with any corrections ... once my exam was gone, it was gone." Sandy described the isolation that she felt in the class. "I thought that it was a lot of teaching myself ... I was by myself a lot. I remember feeling left out a couple of times. Because, I didn't have the classroom opportunity, so I would have to do all of my studying by myself." She had experience in other online courses, and she knew what it was like to have a responsive instructor. She explained, "I think in person, I would be more apt to ask questions. I have one online professor who always responds, so I can question, but other ones, I don't know. Most of the time, I just try to figure it out myself." The unresponsiveness of the HRC instructor left Sandy feeling alone and isolated.

Samantha experienced the lack of student-teacher interaction in a way similar to Sandy. She expressed her disappointment. "I never posted something with my HRC and had my teacher comeback and say 'oh, that is a good thought' nothing like that."

Samantha added, "You are not seeing the feedback from the faculty member in the HRC in terms of knowing whether what you are saying is making a difference, or is read, or is

up there.” Her HRC instructor did not respond to her or other students on the discussion board, and she was saddened that the instructor did not take advantage of the opportunity to interact with the class. Samantha emphasized the importance of the student and instructor interaction when she said, “It would be easier for me to do what I need to do if I felt a little more connected with the class, and with the teacher.”

Geraldine’s mirrored the remarks of other participants. “The professor ... it is weird never to meet your professor ... you could click on something about the biography of the professor, so I knew what [the professor] looked like. There was a photo. But I never actually saw or spoke with this person.” She felt further distanced from her instructor when she got “zero feedback.” She went on to say, “All you get is a grade ... you submit, and then you find out eventually what your grade is and that is it. And if it is a low grade, you will have no idea why. It had ZERO feedback.”

Participant voices reflected a resounding absence of student-instructor interaction within the HRCs. When instructors did respond or interact, participants were sensitive to the instructor’s style of communication. Geraldine found when the instructor did reply, the style of communication did not encourage interaction. She went on to explain how the instructor interfaced with students on the discussion board. “Whenever anyone would ask [the instructor] a question, the answer would be, ‘yes, no, read page 23’.” She explained, that when the instructor did respond to an e-mail or the discussion board, the instructor would “respond monosyllabically ... It was so ‘yes, no’... It was a two word answer.” When she read the cryptic responses, she said, “you sort of felt slapped.” Geraldine added, “I am sure [instructor] just would argue, ‘so, I told you what you needed to know,

what is your problem?’ But it just didn’t feel warm. I would like to have had an online course that felt warm.”

Kay (who completed two HRCs) was also inhibited by the instructor’s tone in one of her classes. “I think I personally e-mailed [instructor] a couple of times to ask a few basic questions, and [instructor] would point out where to find the answer.” She said she found the instructor to be “a little bit short with me and with other people. I don’t know, not condescending, but just ... I don’t know that I would have asked [instructor] a lot of questions. Just very short, and to the point you know.” Kay found that the tone of the instructor’s responses discouraged interaction with students.

Julie offered that while she received prompt feedback from her instructor, the responses were limited. “The basic feedback was ‘no this is wrong’ ... not ... oh you know you should have done it this way. It was just no, this is wrong ... right, or wrong ...” The lack of explanation left Julie feeling lost in understanding her HRC material.

Participants cared about the frequency of their interaction with instructors, and they also cared about the quality of the interaction. Short, cryptic responses and a lack of nonverbal cues created a chilling climate and added to their feelings of *Isolation*. Alyson found a way to mitigate the *Isolation* that she felt when her HRC instructor did not respond with complete answers to her questions. She was quick to read the nonverbal cues from their e-mail messages. She developed a proactive approach to handling electronic communication with her instructor. She discovered the question had to be articulated correctly to get the needed response. Even though she wrote to her instructor just a few times with some basic questions, she explained that the degree to which the response was helpful to her was dependent on the extent to which she was able to

formulate and articulate her questions. She found the instructor was, “good at getting back to me as long as I could produce a good question ... if I didn’t ask the right question, then I wasn’t going to get the answer that I needed.” Alyson’s insightfulness prompted her to get her questions answered allowing her to offset her *Isolation* and move forward in her course.

Other participants were not able to find the techniques to forge interaction with their instructors; thus, they were starved for feedback. Without the interaction, without feedback, without a relationship with their instructor, participants were pushed further into *Isolation*.

Void in Student-to-Student Connections

With little interaction from their instructors, participants searched for other ways to mitigate their *Isolation* and make their surreal classroom feel real. They valued connections with other students within their learning environment. Participants found little opportunity to connect and interact with other HRC students. They were vocal about this missing element within their HRCs.

Geraldine said, “I think the interaction among students is EVERYTHING! The friendships that you make at college are lifelong. So there isn’t any of that. You don’t get that.” David added, “I really need the interaction. I need different perspectives. I think with the community, not only are you learning from yourself, from the manual, from the instructor, but you are also learning from the other people in the class.” Julie found the interaction with her classmates was a source of support that was missing in her HRC. “Learning from other students is a huge learning [opportunity] and a huge obstacle to try to overcome with not having contact with other students.”

Participants found little occasion within the HRCs to collaborate with other students. Geraldine said she did not “see or speak with anybody in the course ... I just read what they would put on the discussion board, and they read what I did. And I think somebody commented to me once.” She went on to say, “My sense was, that was a shame. That there wasn’t discussion on the discussion board.” Geraldine told how her excitement turned to disappointment when the instructor invited students to participate on the discussion board. “And I thought, oh that is great. We can really talk about all of this stuff. And that didn’t happen at all ... that felt unfortunate.” Geraldine described her disenchantment with the discussion board design:

There were questions each week that we were supposed to answer, and most people answered them in two sentences. ... a couple of them would say, ‘You know, I really liked so and so’s answer, and I agree with that.’ But that is not what I would call a discussion, there was no discussion. No sharing. So, we were all sort of out there on our own. And for me, that was OK. But it made me think, for the most part, I would not want to take online courses. Because half of the fun of a course is the discussion and the sharing and really thinking about the subject.

Without the ability to connect with other students, Geraldine felt alone and isolated in her HRC. She said, “So, I was learning what I needed to know, but I was just sort of on this island, all by myself. That is the way it felt.”

David’s feelings of *Isolation* mirrored those of Geraldine. He said, “I felt really anonymous in my HRC, and I didn’t really feel empowered to say anything.” He went on to explain how the course management system limited interaction within the HRC classroom:

[The course management system] offered me no opportunity to use ... that function, to contact my other classmates. I needed to look at who was in the class and send out an anonymous e-mail and hope that person would read my e-mail ... that person would be able to help me ... if that person was even still taking the class. ... And I just didn’t see any kind of human interaction inside of the HRC. ... There was absolutely NO peer interaction. And for some people, I guess it is not

really that important, but for me, it is ultimate. ... I would say a big part of my expectation for my education is education through experience, education through interaction. And I felt like there was the least bit of interaction to the HRC.

Julie also found the structure of HRC provided little opportunity for interaction in the online classroom, and it was not a place where she could turn for support. She explained:

I have no problem sending e-mails to people once you get the class lists, because that was basically what you had to do if you wanted speak someone in the class. But it takes you two weeks before you get to know things about this person to know whether they can understand what you are going through and what your question is. You know, people don't check their e-mails all the time, and so by the time someone would respond to an e-mail the issue is totally over, and it would not have helped me anyway.

As Julie reflected on why she didn't do well in the course, she said, "there wasn't the instructor help that there could have been, and there wasn't the student community help that there could have been. You know, it was out of my comfort zone."

Samantha described her online classroom as having "no interaction between the students, student interaction is nonexistent, it is nonexistent! Nonexistent! Nonexistent! I know nothing about these people, nonexistent!" Samantha said the discussion board assignment allowed students to "do your own thread, or answer somebody else's." The instructor simply required a response to the question without encouraging student-to-student interaction. Samantha was disappointed that the instructor did not have an instructional design that encouraged more student interaction. Samantha articulated the void in the course by saying "it's just not as interactive, teacher-student or student-to-student."

Scott also found a lack interaction with other students in his HRC. "We just gave input to [the instructor's] question of the week ... rather than responding to someone

else's input." He said the only interaction that he had with other students was if he "read the other people's responses" to the discussion questions. He found the structure for that type of interaction did not exist in his HRC. Scott described the participation requirement for his HRC as lacking engagement:

There was a question of the week, which was good, because everybody had to do a little intro, but what I found extremely boring ... the questions were absolutely unengaging. Like, what did you learn about HRC? ... What do you think? ... And one could make really ... very interesting questions.

The lack of interaction was problematic for Scott and caused him to miss some assignments,

Often times I just forgot. I was like, you know, OK, now it is time, Monday, but what is the question? It was like ... some question that you could answer in a sentence." He went on to say, "instead of doing that at the time I thought, oh my god, I want to think about this. This just too boring. I want to come up with something more involved. But then I just forgot ... you know, two or three times, I just missed it.

The voice of Scott and other HRC participants illustrate the void in student-to-student interaction.

Participants spoke of the discussion board within the course management system as the place to interact with their classmates. They expressed disappointment in the instructional design of the discussion board feature within the HRCs. They reported that this feature was used minimally in some of the HRCs and not at all in others. Participants did not feel that the discussions were monitored or encouraged. This led to a lack of confidence in the information presented by other students. Kay said the discussion board forum was not useful to her. "We had weekly questions that he would give out and the responses that I read, were not helpful." Keith said that he did not trust that his classmates gave him "a valid response." Tim echoed Keith's remarks, "I do remember using the discussion board more to bounce it off other students. Although that wasn't as much of a

help. It was kind of spotty. Sometimes you'd get a response, sometimes you wouldn't."

He had the sense that "we were all lost."

HRC participants described an online environment that did not promote meaningful student-to-student interaction. They were looking for a vibrant discussion board with interesting dialog about their HRC subject. They wanted to enhance their learning environment through connection with their classmates. Instead, there was a void of interaction between the HRC students. The void compounded the isolation felt by participants. Those with online experiences in other courses knew the level of *Isolation* in their HRCs was unique, one that did not exist in their other online courses. They knew what it felt like to have an interactive online class. This awareness intensified their sense of *Isolation* in their HRCs.

Possibility of a Different Experience

Participants with other online class experience knew of the possibilities of having a lively, interactive online classroom. They knew they did not have to feel alone and isolated. They contrasted their isolated HRC experience to that of other online classrooms. Tim's enrollment in other online classes provided a reference point, and he talked about the contrast in his experience:

This [other online] class I had, [the instructor] seemed really engaged in the whole thing. [The instructor] had the whole thing set up. There was a lot to do. Even though it was an online course, it was set up where there were group projects, there was so much discussion that you had to do on the discussion board, there were certain readings, and certain research, and just that kind of ... there were things to do and [the instructor] was always popping up on the discussion board and stuff. ... And even in [another online] class that I just took, the instructor was kind of hovering a little farther back, but the class was so thought out. [The instructor] gave us this huge syllabus for the entire thing explaining what [the instructor] expected of us for each week, in a lot of detail. So we always knew what was coming up. We always knew what was expected.

Tim was excited and enthused as he talked about his other courses. He described course designs that encouraged student-to-student interaction, collaboration, and strong organization. Unlike the HRCs, he described a strong instructor presence in his other online courses.

Julie was accustomed to having a vibrant and interactive online classroom community. She contrasted her HRC class to others she had completed at another community college. “The teacher would open it up. ‘Here is the discussion board for the week. If you have any questions or problems, go back and forth with each other.’ And there was none of that [in the HRC].” She added that in her HRC, “the discussion board wasn’t even accessible.” Julie compared the classroom interaction of her HRC with another online class that she took at the same time. “We had a discussion board where you give your thoughts on this week’s topic, and then you have to critique two other person’s thoughts. That got a lot of personal interaction going.” Julie described another experience in an online class where she found the teacher “just so great because [the instructor] was in there ... and it was like hey guys, go to this web site and check this out. And it wasn’t the doldrum of doo, doo, doo. This is how it is, bla, bla, bla.” Julie’s disappointment in her HRC was elevated knowing that online learning could be interactive and exciting.

David was taking two other online classes at the same time as the HRC. He said, “The difference between that class and my other online classes ... I really felt like there was a community of students that I could contact if I needed help.” He said that in one of his other online classes, he felt “very motivated to participate in that class because of [instructor’s] interaction, what [the instructor] shared from [instructor’s] experience, what

[the instructor] was writing from [the instructor's] experience as a teacher, and from [the instructor's] experience as a person.” He said that because of the way the instructor interacted with students, “I was more motivated to get my stuff done, to read their stuff, to help them get their stuff done.” Because the teacher created a sense of community in the classroom, David said, “I liked being in their group, because I felt like it was part of my community. I had a bigger responsibility to more than just myself.” David continued, “My [other online] instructor, right there on the front page, here is what you need to do ... if you don’t understand something, ‘ask your group that you are in’ because that is why you are in that group.” David described the instructor as involved, letting students know, “these are the best time to get me. Here is when we are having online chats. We’ve been hanging out, talking about stuff, we are really having a good time. If you are not there, you should come on in.” He described this class as a “model” online class, “I felt that there wasn’t anything in that class that really could have been done any better.” When he compared the model class to his HRC, he said, “And I felt like there was NOTHING like that going on ... I felt like, specifically in that [HRC] class, I was alone and adrift.”

Sandy was enrolled in the same course that David described at the model. She said, “I have one class that I am taking online. It has a lot of interactions and postings. And I think through that requirement you start talking to your classmates more. I’ve noticed that if the instructors don’t require it, I don’t tend to do it.” She went on to say, “I think [the instructor] is awesome. I like him a lot. I’ve never met [the instructor] but I think [the instructor] is great. I feel very positive about all of my experiences with [model online course].”

Scott also completed the online course that David and Sandy referenced. He was able to contrast his online course experience. He talked extensively of how the instructor of the model online course created an exciting online environment:

You should check out that [online course] by [instructor]. [Instructor] has a discussion board every week where people have to look up a web page, answer some questions, and then find another web page to the topic, and post it and give input on two other peoples' responses. So it is way more engaging.

Scott offered a suggestion on how to increase the personalization within an online course, "I must say that in the [other online] class, for one of the first assignments, [the instructor] has a link to a home page where you just actually have to [upload your] picture and you do the text, and then it pops up for everyone to see."

Samantha also offered her thoughts. "I don't feel as connected to my HRC as I do to my [other online] class. My [other online] class, I feel is more of a class." Several times she stated that the HRC did not have the feel of the class because it lacked student-to-student interaction and interaction with her instructor. She suggested the lack of connectivity to the course may be a reason for high rates of withdrawal. She expressed that "if the HRC could catch the people and make them feel more like a class" the experience would have been improved.

Participants with contrasting online course experience brought expectations of student-instructor interaction to their HRC course. They knew how this brought the online classroom to life and how it enriched the online experience. They were not satisfied with the interaction in their HRCs. Their contrasting experiences let them know there were ways to enhance the HRCs experience.

Overcoming Isolation

The voices of participants illustrated the grave impact *Isolation* had on their HRC learning experience. In some cases, the *Isolation* felt by participants, if not a deciding factor, certainly contributed to their decision to withdraw from the course. When Tom said, “I wanted to withdraw myself from that course as soon as possible” it was because of the *Isolation* he felt when he was unable to establish interaction with his instructor and his classmates. David had “given up” when he was unable to get the support he needed. Julie was out of her “comfort zone” when she was unable to establish connections with her instructor and her classmates. All three participants withdrew from their classes. Even though these participants felt the *Isolation*, others found ways to reduce their loneliness.

Relationships and services outside of the virtual classroom community became important sources of support for participants as they worked through the *Isolation* of their HRCs. Family, friends, neighbors, employers, and college services became a network of support for HRC participants.

Family and employer support. Even with flexible course delivery, Kay knew she needed a network of support to help her complete her online classes. She was resourceful in finding the help that she needed. Her employer provided financial support for her courses. When she needed tutoring, she found coworkers with expertise in the subject matter. “I went to people at work.” She described her employer as “100%” helpful and supportive. Kay relied on her mother for assistance with her young daughter. “My mom was very instrumental in helping me.” Kay explained that her mother would watch her daughter while she studied:

I would have to pretend that I was sneaking outside so that my daughter wouldn’t see me. And my mom and I share a house, so I would pretend I was leaving so she

wouldn't know that I was there, and I just kind of shut myself in my room and studied on my bed with a pillow on my lap. So that is kind of how I did it.

Keith found the support he needed from his supervisor and his wife. His supervisor was adept in the course content, and he was willing to spend the extra time with Keith when he needed tutoring. His wife understood the challenges that he faced and provided the personal support and a home environment where he could complete his assignments.

Sandy said, that even though she “drew pretty much on my own,” her boyfriend had just completed a course similar to her HRC and he was able to assist her. She said “he had a couple of books that were helpful.” She added, “Yes, and see I had a neighbor too, who was majoring in HRC ... so I asked him a couple of questions. He was good at explaining.”

Carly knew that her husband was there to help in her learning. He was able to provide both technical and emotional support. She stated, “I knew I had a husband in the back. You know, he is really, really sharp ... with [course subject], he's really sharp.” He was also supportive of her need to focus and spend time on her online HRC, “if I was in my classroom setting, you know he would be over there doing his own thing quietly. You know, not bothering me. If I had questions, I could turn around, and he would be there.”

Helen had the support of her employer both in time and money. “If I need to go to SCC, I just write on my whiteboard, at SCC, or at lunch. And I come back whenever I am done my test. They pay for everything. They pay for books, materials and course costs, any fees that are incurred.” Helen, Kay, Keith, Sandy, and Carly were successful in finding assistance outside the HRC environment. The family and employer support of these participants helped reduce their isolation of the HRCs.

College services. In a few instances participants spoke of SCC services as a source of support. Scott described how he found assistance in the library when he needed help with an HRC project. “So what I ended up doing, I went to the library. The librarian there at night, she is really very nice, but she was also a little bit bored. You know, so she helped me through it.”

Carly was familiar with the resources provided by SCC to assist online students, “they told you that you could come to the learning center where they have tutoring.” She knew she could turn to the campus resources such as tutoring or technical assistance if she needed extra help. While Carly was aware of the resources, she did not take advantage of the services when she struggled in her HRC. Like Carly, other participants were also aware of support services at the college, but they did not utilize them.

Julie was aware that SCC provided resources to assist students. Even though the college was in the same town as her work, the competing demands within her busy life did not allow her time to schedule assistance. “You know my availability hours and their availability hours ... not in sync at all.”

One of the reasons participants enrolled in their HRCs was to gain the flexibility of time and place. Having to go to campus at a set time to receive help defeated their purpose of enrolling in an online class. In most cases, participants looked to resources external to the college to find support for their HRC. They turned to family, friends, neighbors, and employers for help and to reduce their feelings of *Isolation*.

Shadows of Isolation

In this phenomenological analysis, the structures represent the pervasive themes that occurred for participants. The structures are not absolute and in a few instances

participants experienced shadows of the extreme *Isolation* felt by many participants. These shadows were voiced in both the participants' interaction with instructors and classmates.

Instructor-student interaction. To provide a fair portrayal of *Isolation* as a structure it is important to emphasize that not all HRC instructors were unresponsive to student needs. Participants provided some instances when instructors were both helpful and responsive. When participants were able to connect with the HRC instructors for help, they felt supported. For example, some of the HRC classes offered a tailored orientation programs for students. The programs were held at the campus prior to the start of the semester. Students who attended these sessions learned about expectations for the course and ways of obtaining support. The students who took advantage of the sessions found the meetings helpful. At the session, they also had a chance to meet face-to-face with the instructor. The meeting established a positive connection for the students. Participants who took advantage of these sessions were impressed that the instructor "actually took the time to make sure that we knew who they were, where they were, if we saw them on campus, we could ask them questions." Participants who made the effort to attend the orientation sessions and connect with their instructor, face-to-face, felt supported, and made comments like the instructor is "great" and "very available to you."

Another instance of instructor support occurred when Tom and Carly both struggled with their HRC classes. As the withdrawal date for the classes approached, they arranged face-to-face or telephone meetings with their instructors. While both participants did not complete their HRCs, they did indicate that their instructors were

responsive and willing to meet with them in person (Tom) and by phone (Carly) to counsel them on their decision to withdraw.

It is also important to point out, even though some instructors were available for help, participants were not always able to make the connection. When Kay was asked if she ever went to her HRC instructors for help, and she replied, “No, it was just easier to use the resources at work. If I had to though, I would have ... it never got to the point.” Even though Helen withdrew from her HRC, she felt supported by the instructor, and she planned to retake the class online at some point in the future. She said that she did not know whether or not she would need her instructor’s help, and “because of my tight schedule, I won’t go unless I need to.” As noted before, if the support from instructors and the college was not available when they needed it and convenient to their schedule, participants did not utilize this resource.

Student-to-student connection. In order to provide a fair portrayal of *Isolation* as a structure, it is important to point out a second shadow to the structure of isolation. Not all participants felt negatively impacted by *Isolation* within the HRCs. In fact, Carly indicated that she was comfortable with the lack of student-to-student interaction. She enrolled in the HRC because she felt “rushed” by the presence of other students in campus classes in the HRC content area. The online environment protected her from the social embarrassment of asking questions in front of her peers when she didn’t understand. She was also looking for an alternative way to learn the HRC. She said, “And I thought maybe I can try to teach myself a different method. ... I have the text, I have whatever online assistance there is through this class.” The *Isolation* of the HRC classroom was compatible with Carly’s needs.

Helen, an experienced online learner, did not find it necessary to interact with other students in her HRC. “I don’t think for HRC I need student-to-student collaboration.” She explained interaction with others was dependent on the subject of the online course. “I think with objective courses such as the HRC, having a knowledgeable instructor is more important than having class collaboration among other students.”

Sandy, also an experienced online learner, echoed Helen’s comments when she said, “there weren’t required discussions. I don’t even recall there being that many students in the class. I don’t remember feeling the need to ask questions in that class of other students. That was one where I didn’t participate in discussions.”

It is important to note the shadows of the structures that occur in the construction of a phenomenon in order to present a true description of the experience. While *Isolation* was a pervasive theme of the HRC experience, it was not absolute for all participants at all times.

Summary of Isolation

The collective voices of participants portray four dimensions of their HRC experience that contributed to their sense of *Isolation*: (a) the surreal HRC classroom, (b) the lack of student-instructor interaction, (c) the void in student-to-student connections, and (d) the possibility of a different experience.

Participants’ voices portrayed the HRC classroom as surreal. It was not a tangible place. They articulated the difficulty of interpreting an abstract concept into a space that felt real. To make the classroom feel real, they needed to be able to bridge the virtual world to their real world through an inanimate object, a computer. As they logged into their course management system, they needed to be able to connect to this virtual world

by downloading course documents, interacting with other students on the class discussion board, interacting with their instructor through the courseware e-mail, and dropping assignments in a digital drop box. Many participants knew the virtual world could be a lively place, but it was not in the HRCs. It was static. Use of the discussion board was minimal with no meaningful student or instructor interaction. Responses from the instructors to e-mails or discussion board postings were cryptic, if present at all. Without a requirement to interact with other students or the instructor, many participants downloaded the course documents and took the class off line. As Tim said, "There wasn't really much to it ... it kind of felt like an independent study ... and a little too much. Not only was it not in a classroom, it almost wasn't online either." Tom echoed Tim with his remarks about the surreal nature of his HRCs, "What class? What professor? What assignments?" HRC participants were tempted to believe there was no class at all.

Struggling to find life within their classroom, participants reached out to establish a relationship with others. Unlike campus classrooms where Keith said, "there are other people around you to talk to, [where] you can figure out what is going on," HRC participants didn't see anyone, and they didn't have a sense that anyone was present. They hoped the instructor would come alive. When they tried to contact the instructor they received a cryptic reply as Geraldine described "yes, no, see page 23." In some cases they received no reply at all. They received little feedback on their papers and tests. In many instances, the only feedback they received was a score in the grade book of the course management system. As Keith said, the lack of responsiveness "sort of cut the tie of student and instructor relationship." The lack of interaction between the instructors and

the HRC participants increased as the semester progressed, leaving them with a greater sense of *Isolation*.

Participants had little to no contact with other students in their HRC classrooms. There was no chance to hear others' perspectives, no opportunity to learn from each other. Geraldine summarized the importance of student-to-student connections, "I think the interaction among students is EVERYTHING!" David expanded on Geraldine's statement, "I think with the community, not only are you learning from yourself, from the manual, from the instructor, but you are also learning from the other people in the class." Participants had no sense of community within their HRCs, no peer interaction. For David, having a student community was "ultimate" and for Julie "a huge obstacle to try to overcome." The void in student-to-student interaction intensified the sense of *Isolation* felt by the HRC participants.

Through their outside experiences in other online classes, many participants realized virtual classrooms could be vibrant, interactive, and filled with life. Participants knew there were ways to reduce the feelings of *Isolation* that ran rampant throughout the HRCs. The remedy for their *Isolation* was human interaction. Participants saw the instructor-student interaction and student-to-student connections as the conduit to reduce the *Isolation* and bring life to their virtual classroom. When they did not find the human element within their HRCs, they were trapped within their own sense of *Isolation*.

Academic Challenge

Introduction to Academic Challenge

Envision that you are alone in a room with just your computer, your textbook, and two binders of materials that you have downloaded from the HRC course management system. It is ten o'clock at night and the house is finally quiet. You are in the third week of your HRC, and your second test is due in two days. Before you even open your text book, you feel anxious. You think about the first test. You spent several days memorizing the content. Even though you thought you understood the material going into the test, it was much harder than you expected. The questions were confusing. You had a hard time applying what you studied. You remember the knot in your stomach as you submitted the test. A few days later, you learned that even though you passed the test, your grade was less than stellar. You revisit your earlier thoughts about how the course would "be a breeze" (Julie, HRC student). You try to regain your confidence by telling yourself that you have completed all of the course prerequisites, your reading and writing skills are strong, you were good at math in high school, and you know your way around a computer. You decide to stay with the course, thinking that if you put in a little more time, surely you will be able to do better. As you open the next chapter to review the material for the second time, it is not making any sense to you. You don't understand the terminology, you can't figure out the applications, you are totally lost. The knot in your stomach returns. You feel overwhelmed.

This overwhelming feeling describes *Academic Challenge*, the second structure that HRC participants experienced. *Academic Challenge* was heard in four areas as participants described their experience: (a) unrealistic expectations, (b) academic content,

(c) course structure, and (d) technology frustrations. In most cases, the expectations of participants did not match the reality that they found. They believed the academic content would be easy to understand; instead they often found concepts unfamiliar, complex, and nonintuitive. The content of the HRCs was cumulative. To progress, participants needed to grasp and understand the content in sequential order. Failure to do so left them feeling behind and lost in their course. Some participants were challenged because they lacked interest or confidence in the course content. The discord with the subject matter posed a barrier for them. The way in which the HRCs were structured impacted the learning experience of participants. HRCs that were condensed into a shortened summer semester format, advanced at a rapid pace. When participants were unable to keep up with the pace, they lost the grounding necessary to stay current with the course. Participants were challenged to maintain interest in the subject matter when practical applications were delayed until the later portion of the course. Technology hurdles surfaced throughout the HRCs. The nature and extent of the problems varied. The challenge for some was understanding the course management system. Others had to resolve hardware and software compatibility issues. Technology concerns that occurred early in the course left HRC participants feeling anxious and threatened their ability to keep pace with the course. Following is an account of four areas of *Academic Challenge* as participants told of their experience.

Unrealistic Expectations

Participants experienced disagreement between the expectations they had of their HRC and the reality they discovered. Most believed the content would be relatively easy to understand, and they would have the intellect, time, and personal resources required to

master the material. They expected that they would be able to keep up with the pace of the course. They were confident they could handle the technology challenges.

Participants felt prepared for their HRCs. All entered their HRC with basic computer literacy, many with advanced competencies. Everyone had the basic prerequisite reading, writing, and math skills required to enroll in their HRCs. They were all experienced college students. Even with this preparation, once they entered the HRCs, they were surprised at the difficulty of the academic content, and the amount of effort required to learn the material. They expected to find a much less demanding class. In reality, many found a course with unfamiliar and complex content that advanced at a rapid pace.

Alyson entered her HRC confident of her preparation. She believed she would be able to master the content with little difficulty. She was candid about her expectations for the course:

Honestly, I didn't know how difficult it was going to be. I was a bit, probably snobby, because I am really good at [HRC subject] and always picked up on it quickly. Never had a problem. And so I thought, this will be easy. But, it really did take some major brain power.

Early in the course, Alyson realized that she needed to realign her expectations to match the reality of her HRC. She adjusted her priorities to accommodate the demands of her HRC.

Kay expected her HRC class to be easy for her, but she soon discovered differently. "The HRC just seemed like it would be the easier class. But, that is what I thought! It was a little bit more challenging." Kay's related work experience provided her with some context for the course content, but even with this background, she worked hard to learn the concepts and admitted that she did "struggle" as the course became more complex. She found some material "really hard for me to grasp."

Kay and Alyson were able to resolve the difference between their unrealistic expectations for their HRC. They were quick to identify the adjustments they would have to make to complete their courses. Other participants like Julie, David, and Tom were left vulnerable by the incongruence between their expectations and the reality they experienced. For them, the discord became a barrier to completing the course.

When Julie enrolled in her HRC, she said, “I thought it would be a breeze.” She had prior experience with online courses which were “easy” for her. She expected to find the coursework in her HRC “easy” as well. As Julie began, she was taken back by the rigor of the course. Her unrealistic expectations left her unprepared to make the adjustments in her life necessary to master the course content. Her HRC experience led her to rethink her expectations of online courses. “I don’t think anybody should go in with the preconceived notion just because it is an online class it is going to be easier.”

David was another participant who entered his HRC finding a different reality from his expectations. His reaction was similar to Julie’s. “I didn’t know that the HRC was going to be so tough for me ... I didn’t have a clue ... I didn’t really know what I was getting into.” David added there was “a lot more to the HRC” than he had expected. The unmatched expectations and reality left David at a disadvantage, and he was unable to complete the course.

Like Julie and David, Tom was also surprised by the demands of the HRCs. He commented, “My expectation was that ... I would not have to do as much work ... I definitely went into it thinking, well this is going to be an easier course.” Like other participants, Tom learned that completing the requirements of the HRCs was more difficult than he expected.

The unrealistic expectations realized by participants set the stage for other areas of challenge they experienced in the HRCs. Academic content, course pace, and technology hurdles unfolded as key dimensions of this structure.

Academic Content

Four elements make up the challenge participants experienced with academic content: (a) unfamiliar and complex content, (b) absolute, non-intuitive content, (c) cumulative content, and (d) discord with subject matter. The unfamiliar and complex content left participants searching for a context to understand the material. The absolute, nonintuitive nature of the HRC content left no room for interpretation. The rigidity of the content challenged participants' understanding of the material. The content of the HRCs was cumulative. In order to advance in the course, participants needed to understand each lesson in sequence. When they missed a step or lagged behind, they had difficulty regaining their posture within the course. Some participants held divergent attitudes toward the academic content. Their lack of interest or confidence in learning the subject became an obstacle for them. A discussion follows that highlights the challenge participants experienced in four areas related to academic content.

Unfamiliar and complex content. Even though all of the participants met the course prerequisites in reading, writing, and math for the HRC courses, many had no prior experience with the specific subject matter. They were challenged to find context for the unfamiliar and complex content. They discovered new terminology, complicated formulas, and foreign content in their HRCs. They struggled to find meaning.

Julie had particular difficulty grasping the subject matter. She described the challenge she faced with the unfamiliar and complex content:

You might as well step right into it blind, not knowing, not knowing enough ... I think there are so many concepts and so many rules, and so much terminology ... I think, unless you come into it knowing, from an [HRC subject] family where that is your dinner conversation, I think it would be very difficult. ... The text book was yellow by the time I got done highlighting. Because I didn't know what the general principle was that I was looking for, I was highlighting everything. ... not having a clue what I was doing ... I just didn't understand the concepts.

Julie was unable to translate the technical language into meaningful terms. "I don't need all of the fancy terminology. Just give it to me, what we are supposed to do." The HRC class in the online environment was overwhelming for Julie. She believed she would need a different learning environment to be able to complete the subject. "It is one of those classes where I am going to have to be physically in the classroom and be told and shown how to do it." She acknowledged "the reason for withdrawing was that I just didn't get it."

David and Helen both remarked how their lack of experience with their HRC content created challenges in learning the terminology. David said, "I don't have any real HRC experience. So the terminology was difficult for me to master." Helen also came to her HRC with "zero" background. She explained, "it is hard ... when you don't understand what the words mean. So, that was a big problem for me." Helen provided additional perspective. "It is very intense. There is a lot of reading; there is a lot of memorization. And for some people, that comes very easy. Memorization is what they do well ... HRC and memorization are not my strong points."

Tim also struggled to grasp an understanding of the material in his HRC. Even though he was able to demonstrate a basic understanding of the subject, he had a sense that his knowledge was superficial:

And I just sat there and I thought, these sections that I had problems with, where I didn't really understand what was going on here, you know it got to the point

where I could kind of go through the motions of, I could do the problems, but I had no idea what I was doing. ... It's kind of like, if I had a harder problem, I probably would have got it wrong ... Where the easier problems, if you have a basic understanding, you can do them, somehow. But then, when you get a harder problem, trying to use your basic understanding to figure it out, and you don't get it right for some reason, and you are racking your brain, why am I not getting this right? And, you don't know. And it was a lot like that.

While Tim did complete his HRC, he did not feel that he had mastered the material.

Participants found the unfamiliar and complex course content difficult to grasp in the online environment. They were left feeling lost and uncertain about their HRC subject matter.

Absolute nonintuitive content. The absolute, nonintuitive nature of the HRC content presented a particular challenge for participants. Many had experience in other online courses where there was room for interpretation in understanding and applying the content. Such courses allowed for unfixed and intuitive responses. Participants found the HRCs to be just the opposite. The content of the HRCs was absolute in nature, with no room for intuition or interpretation. Participants described the answers to questions as either “right or wrong, black or white” with no gray areas. They had to learn the content.

Tom illustrated why the fixed, concrete nature of his HRC was difficult in an online environment:

With the HRC course ... there is only one way to do it. There is a right or a wrong way ... when you are taking an online course, it is very difficult to determine what the black and the white is. In a classroom setting, you have a professor saying, alright, that is wrong, but let me show you how to correct it. Whereas, in an online course, you don't always have that flexibility. Sure, you can send an e-mail to the professor, saying alright, I got this answer wrong, can you please explain it to me, and they will do the best they can. It maybe doable for the student to actually learn it that way, it may not be. But it is going to be different from what they get in the classroom.

Without the immediate feedback of the instructor to help Tom understand the “black and white” he was challenged to grasp the course content of his HRC. Julie found the absolute nature of the course limiting, “black and white” and “cut and dry, you know, this is how it has to be done ... there is no gray area” with no room for opinion. In addition, Julie found no examples, no applications, no resources inside of the course that helped her learn the material. It was just very cut and dry. Here it is, take it or leave it.” She searched for alternatives, “you know, I just thought there had to be an easier way than the way they were describing how to do it, and apparently there wasn’t.”

David echoed Tom and Julie’s remarks when he described his HRC as inflexible. “Where there is a right answer, there is a wrong answer.” He continued, “there was only one way you were going to get to understand this ... it is, how it is, how it is. And you either did or did not understand that. Which is it going to be?” The answer to that question for David, Tom, and Julie was that they did not understand, and they did not complete their HRCs.

Helen explained, “I feel boxed in. I feel boxed in by these numbers, and by having to lay things out a certain way. And, there is only one right answer. Always, there is only one right answer. And that is just a lot for me.” She went on to say that for her, “being able to explain myself, and explain my reasoning, and think through a situation is easier than putting together a formula and showing the results on paper, which is what this is.”

From the lens of participants, the absolute nature of the content of the HRCs did not allow room for perspective, intuition, or opinion. The content of the HRCs was fixed, with distinct right and wrong answers. The static nature of the online environment did not provide participants timely feedback to know if their answers were right or wrong. Not

knowing if their work was correct, they were stifled as they tried to learn the material. Participants were challenged to learn the rigid HRC content in the HRC online environment.

Cumulative content. The cumulative nature of the HRC content presented unique challenges for participants. The subject matter required sequenced learning where earlier topics provided foundation for later ones. Participants had to progress methodically through each step to comprehend the topics. Missing or skipping a step precluded learning in the HRCs.

Carly was challenged by the sequential and cumulative nature of her HRC. She found the course required her “full attention, because I need to put the steps together.” This was a different experience for her as she compared her other online classes where “even if I skimmed over something, I knew what it was, or I could put everything together.” She described her approach to her HRC as methodical, sequenced, cumulative, and “if you missed something, you missed the whole problem.” Carly added, “That is why I wound up withdrawing from the HRC, before I got myself in deeper, where I couldn’t catch up.”

The cumulative nature of the HRC presented immediate challenges for David, “I felt a lot of the HRC stuff built on previous topics. So things where I was weak, continued to haunt me as I progressed.” David expressed his frustration with this challenge, “here I am, trying to make progress, and I felt like if I did not succeed in getting chapter 1, well there was stuff in chapter 2 that related back to chapter 1 that I was still patching holes in.”

Like David and Carly, Julie learned early on that when she did not master the first lessons of her HRC, she was unprepared to progress with the remainder of the course. She shared, “especially after three or four weeks into the class, and I knew that I didn’t get it, I knew there was no going back and trying to make it up.”

Alyson explained how this dimension of the course added to the *Academic Challenge*:

The HRC was difficult also in that it was cumulative. So, what you learned in the first chapter you would use in the next chapter, and you would use those in the next chapter. So if you didn’t pick it up in the first or second chapter, you were going to be pretty bad off throughout the entire thing, unless you got some help some how or another. ... And I knew that was going to happen, so I spent more time learning to understand the chapters as I went, instead of getting to a point of later on where I came across something that I didn’t understand that I should have learned in the first chapter. And just losing it from there.

Alyson went into the HRC anticipating the course to be cumulative. Her foresight allowed her to adjust her study strategies to insure she understood the content in the sequential order that it was presented.

Kay also expected her HRC to be cumulative. She described the content as “building foundation blocks. If you are just rushing through it, and really not getting the concept, I think that you will definitely get lost later.” Kay was looking ahead to build a foundation for a sequel class:

I think I could have just breezed through it and gotten a C. But OK, the way I did it, I set myself up so that I won’t struggle so much in the next course. If I hadn’t done what I did ... and taken so much time, then I wouldn’t be ready for the next HRC.

Sandy said the concepts of her HRC accumulated throughout the course and were “applicable to the later chapters.” She said, “If I hadn’t done well at the beginning, I know I definitely would not have been able to grasp the end.” Sandy enjoyed the subject

matter of her HRC and added, “I think that because it was methodical and cumulative, you felt like you did acquire knowledge that had a base that you could do more complex things with it. I did feel a sense of accomplishment with it.”

Carly, David, and Julie found the cumulative nature of their HRC a barrier that they were unable to mitigate in their HRC course. Alyson, Kay, and Sandy anticipated the cumulative nature of their HRCs and they were able to overcome the challenge by building the foundation blocks required by the course content.

Discord with subject matter. Discord with the subject matter heightened the *Academic Challenge* for some participants. The dissonance stemmed from a lack of confidence in the HRC subject. Participants with a discord for the HRC subject matter encountered barriers to their learning.

Carly expressed a lack of confidence with the subject matter of her HRC. She described her relationship with the subject as “Myself and HRC, we don’t really get along, I’m not really strong at HRC.” She put off taking the HRC course required for her program and spoke of how “HRC is what’s between me and my degree.”

The subject matter was a challenge for Julie, “some things come easier to some people than other things do ... and HRC does not come to me easy. ... I didn’t understand the core basic concepts of it ... and it didn’t click for me, and it still hasn’t clicked for me.” Julie expressed her lack of confidence with the subject matter when she said, “so maybe it’s me, I don’t know. I just couldn’t follow it. ... you know people have aptitudes for certain things, and that wasn’t one of them for me.”

Helen was anticipating the challenge of her HRC and said “I think that is why I have avoided it.” Helen was clear about why she saved her HRC for last. “The HRC was

the hard course ... it is my least favorite. Anything dealing with HRC. I avoid the things I don't know, and what I am afraid of. I just HATE HRC."

Keith entered the course knowing the subject matter was not a favorite. His stance was influenced by past experiences as a college student decades ago. He shared that early in his educational experience he decided that "HRC wasn't going to be my career." He expressed discord with the subject matter through repeated statements such as "HRC and me, we just don't play nice together."

The attitudes and feelings about the HRC content matter impacted the experience of the participants. Some managed to overcome this hurdle; others allowed the discord with the subject material to stand in their way of completing their HRC.

Course Configuration and Organization

The configuration and organization of the HRC courses represented a range of challenges for participants. The accelerated time frame of the summer semester posed particular hurdles when participants were unable to keep up with the advanced pace. The content sequence emerged as another stumbling block. For example, when participants encountered extensive reading assignments without practical application, it was difficult for them to maintain interest. Ambiguous assignments and unclear directions left participants floundering in their HRCs.

Accelerated semester. Participants who struggled with academic content were especially challenged during the accelerated summer semester. The class syllabus advanced at a rapid pace. Participants, already surprised by the difficulty of content and the additional work required, found themselves with another disadvantage during the shortened summer semester.

David was one participant who experienced many dimensions of *Academic Challenge*. He found himself in the midst of a course with cumulative content and a challenge much greater than he expected. In addition, he enrolled in this HRC in a summer semester. He found his situation problematic:

I found it really tough to take that class inside of the 10 week summer session. I think things would have ended up totally different for me if it had been a sixteen week, for the sole reason, I could have caught up faster. But, because it was so condensed, I really had a hard time just getting up to speed and before I felt that I had mastered the material, it was already time to take the first test. One of the things about an online class that is so different is the amount of time. Unfortunately, nobody tells you this going into a summer semester ... that you do realize you are taking a 16 week class inside of 10 weeks, and you are taking it online? Do you know what kind of time that is going to be?

David was unprepared to face the multiple challenges of his HRC. He enrolled in a heavy course load during a condensed summer semester. As he tried to balance his time for all of his obligations, he was unable to devote the extra effort needed to overcome the *Academic Challenge* of his HRC.

Helen was another participant who experienced multiple aspects of challenge. She did not expect the course content to be as difficult as it was for her. In addition, she expressed a discord with the subject matter, and she chose to take the course during a condensed summer semester. She realized that she had taken on more than was realistic for the summer term given everything else that was happening in her life:

I mean, a full-time job, technically I am a single mom, a relationship, and [taking] 13 credit hours over the summer. Who does that? So, I backed it off. That is why, I just finally cut HRC ... it was just too much. And, I took 9 credit hours instead. Which actually worked out much better.

Julie also found herself enrolled in her HRC during the summer semester. She was at a distinct disadvantage when she found the course much more difficult than she

expected. Her inability to grasp the academic content imposed further barriers. Enrolling in her HRC during an accelerated summer semester, was more that Julie could bare:

Stressful, stressful. I was spending 20 and 25 hours a week just trying to get the concept. And I found myself taking more time than I have with other courses. And it was just, it was just hell! It really was.

Participants who were not prepared for the *Academic Challenge* on the HRCs were at a disadvantage during an accelerated summer semester.

Content sequence. The content sequence was problematic in the HRCs. Students who persisted in the HRCs found the elements that most interested them occurred in the last half of the class. Geraldine was disappointed in the content sequence:

Well, it is a shame in a way, because the neat, the fun part of the course is in the second half. The first half of the course is massive reading. I mean 400 pages of a great, big, thick text book is a lot of reading. It was a lot of reading. It took a lot of time. And you are not discussing any of it. You are just reading and underlining, reading and underlining, you know. ... [the] second half is all of the practical stuff, it is hands on, you are doing things you are handing them in, and you are finding out that you can do them, and it is colorful, and it is fun. So it is a shame that most people drop out before they get to that.

Sandy made similar comments and expressed disappointment in the structure of one of her HRC classes. She described it as:

Really intense. Because you really had to know ... there were so many different terms ... and I just remember being really overwhelmed at first with that. So, I was disappointed in that class. I think you could get really frustrated with it. I can honestly say, when I first started reading the chapter, it was like, why do I need to know this? ... I don't know, I just thought it was really pointless. I thought that part was a waste of my time because it has no application to me what-so-ever. I wasn't learning the information to retain it or have it be useful. And then comparatively, the last few chapters were so, I don't know, so simple, and silly almost.

Sandy posited that the sequence in which the material was presented in the class may be a reason that students were inclined to withdraw. The sequence of the course content

mattered to participants. Involving them early in topics of interest made a difference to their experience.

Organization. The manner in which the course was presented impressed HRC participants. As online students, they looked for strong course organization, distinct direction in how to master the content, and clarity in their assignments. When they were unable to find these elements, they expressed dissatisfaction.

Tim talked extensively about the confusion that he felt in the course. He found the textbook ambiguous and instructions for assignments unclear and “pretty confusing.” He explained that only some of the material from the text book was required to complete the class assignments. He had a difficult time determining what topics and concepts to study. He explained:

Exactly which concepts we needed to learn, which concepts we didn’t need to learn, that was only indicated by which problems were assigned as homework. But you can’t really tell by looking at the problems, whether you needed these concepts that were explained previously, so you end up spending all this time trying to attack these concepts that you are not going to use later.

He said that the class materials included content that went beyond the scope of the course. “There were some things in that textbook that were kind of way out there. Just like real HRC stuff. Stuff that you would really only use if you going into an area where HRC was your focus.” The ambiguity in what was required to complete the assignments was confusing for Tim. He said it was “hard to separate” the material that he needed for the class and the material that he did not need. He “got mixed up in all these different kind of subsections that we weren’t even using.” The ambiguity left him lost and confused, “I just found myself looking at this stuff saying what is this?” After a period of time in the course, “it got kind of to the point where I could kind of go through the

motions of ... I could do the problems, but I had no idea what I was doing.” The confusion led to frustration. “It was just a lot more frustrating than I was used to.”

Tom expressed a similar sense of confusion. He expressed frustration in having to sort through the material and decide what was important:

You actually had to sit down, do the readings yourself, understand it, figure out what was important to you, that might have corresponded with what the professor thought was important, it might have not. You didn't really have that much of a way to compare the two.

Without clear organization and direction from the instructor, Tom felt overwhelmed trying to decide what to study and what to learn.

Sandy found the way the material was presented left her in a state of confusion.

She explained that what she was learning wasn't linking back to what was actually being assessed on the test:

I remember ... discovering things between the exams and ... because [instructor] gave us specific problems to do and I didn't always feel like it was based on those problems ... I mean, [instructor] went above and beyond. It wasn't like [instructor] was linking the material very well. So I wasn't very happy with that. ... The testing format was really confusing and really disorganized. [Instructor] gave us a key to go through and use it. And the exams always took me three hours to just do the normal test, not even the midterm or final. [Instructor] didn't have a time limit which was good, but it was just hard, with all the formula sheets. It just wasn't very user friendly. I just remember that being really disorganized. Like having to kind of fight through taking the test rather than applying my knowledge. It was like fighting with the exam to understand what [instructor] was trying to find.

In a second HRC, Sandy described a different kind of confusion:

[The instructors] instructions were so unclear. ... I couldn't figure it out for the life of me. ... And it just didn't make any sense. ... where this [web] page was. I had no idea. And I found it on my own; I think I actually checked out 6 or 7 books from the library to do the project. Because the directions that [instructor] had given, apart from the requirements, were, the most confusing thing that I have ever read in my entire life.

When directions were ambiguous and expectations were not clear, participants were left in a frenzy trying to complete projects and prepare for exams. Geraldine provided another example of confusion as she completed her final exam:

I have to mention the final exam, because, I was basically over studying. So I am straight A's all the way through the course. So, I get to the final exam and it is like the entire second half of the course in two hours. You have a multiple choice test, which is sort of regurgitate ... so you do that, and you do well on that, then the rest, you had two hours in which to do 10 or 12 pages of stuff. ... And it just went on and on and on. And I think maybe, others did better because they can move faster than I can. But to me, it was just crazy to think that we could do it. I still got an A in the course because I had so many A's along the way. But it was a really overwhelming exam.

Participants expressed a need for clear expectations, precise instructions, and a distinct understanding of learning outcomes. When HRCs lacked these elements, participants were left lost, confused, and frustrated.

Technology Frustrations

A basic understanding of technology is foundational to success in any online course. All of the participants had the basic computer literacy required to enroll in their HRCs. Even with this preparation, HRC participants experienced hurdles with technology. Navigating the course management system presented challenges for some. Hardware and software compatibility issues were problematic for others. Unresolved technology hurdles occurring early in the semester were especially problematic and left participants anxious, feeling as if they were losing ground in the course.

Keith faced "an extreme learning curve" as he tried to navigate the course management system and learn the courseware terminology. Not knowing how to navigate the course software cost Keith points on assignments and left him feeling as if he was getting behind:

I fell behind because I didn't understand what was happening. I had a three week learning curve. I'd say it took me two to three weeks to figure out what [the course management system] was, how it worked, you know you had your course assignments, your course documents, which were in different areas. And you were trying to figure out which one is an assignment, compared to a document.

Not understanding the course management system added to his frustration when he tried to get in touch with his instructor using the e-mail tool, "It is even more frustrating. Did I send it? Did he get it? Did he send it back and I not get it? Where did it go? Is it with the missing sock in the dryer?" The initial technology hurdles added to the anxiety and frustration that Keith felt in the course.

The HRC was Samantha's first experience with an online course. After an absence from college for more than 15 years, she found herself in the midst of a changing educational paradigm which required that she learn new ways of communicating within an electronic environment. She admitted being "very nervous" when posting her first assignment within the course management system. She stated that "It's been a huge learning curve. Because I am older, and when I went to school before ... the whole [course management system] was nonexistent." Samantha completed the online tutorial for the course management system and experimented with the course tools until she became more comfortable with technology required to complete her HRC. Her perseverance paid off as she mastered the material and completed her course.

Carly experienced initial technology challenges caused by the incompatibility of her personal computer and the specialized course software. When she was unable to open the applications necessary to complete her homework assignments, she felt as if she was loosing ground in the course, "[it] had already set me behind a little while, and so now I was playing....catch up."

David had issues with the course software interfacing with his computer. “I don’t have a computer that runs a standard floppy.” He explained that the course software “comes with a little disc, and you use the disc and do the problems on the disc ... I didn’t have a computer at home that I could put that disc into.” He explained that he had to “go up to school, put it on their computer, put it on my USB, then bring it on back home.” While the problem was one that David was able to resolve, he found it another source of frustration within his HRC.

Kay’s technology challenges surfaced on an assignment late in the course:

I tried to download something, to find out that it didn’t have the features required for the coursework. And so I spent all of this time putting it together ... hours and hours at night and struggling ... I found out online that it didn’t have some kind of feature that was needed for the assignment. So I had to go into chat rooms and things like that ... so I came to find out, that is why I couldn’t get it to work, and that is why the step by step directions weren’t working for me.

Kay was able to resolve her problem through persistence, but the “hours and hours” that she spent working through the issue robbed her of time that she could have been spending completing her assignments.

Geraldine was frustrated by limitations in technology as she tried to submit assignments through the course management system:

When you sent [instructor] the assignment, [course management system] had a system where you couldn’t send it from your document file. You could only send it from your A drive, from your floppy disk. That is the only way it would receive it. It would not take it from anything but your floppy disk. I just thought, oh, that is wild. If it didn’t fit on that disk, forget it honey. I couldn’t send it.

Geraldine was frustrated when her completed assignments exceeded the space of a floppy disk. She was disappointed when she had to scale back her work in order to transmit the assignment through the course software.

Technology issues that occurred throughout the course continued to be a source of frustration for participants. When imposed early in the course, these barriers were especially problematic. Participants felt disempowered, and they were left to feel as if they were behind in the course. Technology hurdles added to the challenges that participants experienced within their HRCs.

Shadow of Academic Challenge

It would be misleading to conclude that all participants experienced *Academic Challenge* in all aspects of their HRCs. Some came to their HRC courses with extensive background in the subject matter and experienced little difficulty with the course content.

Kay enrolled in two different HRCs. One course was especially easy for her, “It was simple, you know ... and the pace was pretty fair.” She explained how her work experience helped her, “I got an A in the class. But again, I have a lot of HRC background. I didn’t know all of the functions that were talked about, it is not like I walked away with no knowledge or anything, it just wasn’t a very challenging course.”

Samantha also had a lot of background in her HRC, and she found the material repetitive of information she already knew. While initially she was challenged to navigate the course management system, she did not find the content difficult. Samantha took the course as a prerequisite for her program of study. From Samantha’s point of view, the HRC was an easy way to earn the credit she needed:

This is the easiest course that I have ever taken in my entire life. How anyone can not get 100% or a 98 at least, is ridiculous. ... And so I drive in for the hour ... my exam that I get an hour for took me ... 3 minutes and 12 seconds. That is what I am driving in for. So it is terrific, but I do feel like I am just checking a box. Checking the box, getting the requirement done. That’s all. Which is fine, that’s fine. If that’s what it is, that’s terrific, I have no complaints. Easy A, I am happy.

Tom had enrolled in two HRCs during different semesters. While he was academically challenged in one of the courses, he had extensive content background in the second course. He viewed himself as an expert in the subject, and he found the HRC content elementary, “Personally, the reason why I withdrew from the course was actually that I was finding the class boring.” He found the “mundane tasks” required of the course unappealing, and he was not able to maintain interest in the online class. “I tried to do the online course. It didn’t really quite work too well for me.” The challenge for Tom was to remain committed to the HRC and to complete the course requirements. During the third week of the course, he decided to withdraw.

Summary of Academic Challenge

Participants experienced four dimensions of the second structure *Academic Challenge*. The four areas that emerged to form the structure were (a) unrealistic expectations, (b) academic content, (c) course structure, and (d) technology frustrations.

The unrealistic expectations set the stage for the arena of *Academic Challenge* within the HRCs. Alyson articulated the unrealistic expectations when she said, “Honestly, I didn’t know how difficult it was going to be.” David echoed her remarks, “I didn’t know that the HRC was going to be so tough for me ... I didn’t have a clue ... I didn’t really know what I was getting into.” Participants like Julie entered the HRCs thinking the course “would be a breeze” only to find a class far more complex and difficult than what they expected.

Challenge in academic content evolved in four areas for participants. The unfamiliar and complex content presented a particular challenge for some participants. They struggled with new terminology, complicated formulas, and foreign content. As

Helen said, “it is hard ... when you don’t understand what the words mean. So, that was a big problem for me.” Without background in the subject matter or a context with which to relate the information, some participants had difficulty understanding the course content. The absolute, non-intuitive nature of the content was difficult for some participants to master. Tom described this aspect of challenge best when he said, “With the HRC course ... there is only one way to do it. There is a right or a wrong way ... when you are taking an online course, it is very difficult to determine what the black and the white is.” The cumulative nature of the course content was problematic when participants did not focus on thoroughly learning the material in sequence. They were unable to complete advanced material when they did not master foundational content. Sandy, who did complete her HRC said, “If I hadn’t done well at the beginning, I know I definitely would not have been able to grasp the end.” Several participants entered their HRC with a distinct discord for the subject matter. Comments like, “HRC and me do not get along” expressed the attitudes some participants had toward the subject matter. The lack of appeal for the content presented a barrier to their learning.

The course structure presented three elements of *Academic Challenge* for participants. The condensed summer semester was especially challenging for participants enrolled in some HRCs. The accelerated pace of the course progression was beyond the capability of some participants. As David pointed out, “Do you realize you are taking a 16 week class inside of 10 weeks, and you are taking it online? Do you know what kind of time that is going to be?” Some HRC participants did not realize the commitment required for a condensed semester. The content sequence presented additional challenges. Participants described some HRCs as heavy in background and theory in the beginning of

the course with little practical application. They had difficulty maintaining interest in the course when they were unable to connect the material to meaningful applications. The course organization and clarity of assignments was especially important to participants. Unclear directions, confusing assignments, and misinformation within some of the HRCs further complicated an already ambiguous virtual environment adding to the *Academic Challenge* of the courses.

A myriad of technology hurdles entered the arena as another area of challenge for participants. Some related to specific academic assignments, others to more general software and hardware issues. These hurdles caused frustration among participants, adding to other areas of *Academic Challenge* that they were experiencing. Participants were especially vulnerable when technology issues occurred in the beginning of the semester. When participants encountered technology problems early in the class, they became anxious and encountered feelings of being behind in the course. The challenge experienced by participants to learn the academic content left them surprised by their unrealistic ideas of what to expect in the course, overwhelmed by the difficulty learning the content, inundated and confused by aspects of the course structure, and frustrated by technology challenges.

Ownership

Introduction to Ownership

The structures of *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* have provided a snapshot of what your experience might be like in an HRC. As you enter the second week of class, you realize you need to make adjustments in your approach to the course to accommodate the isolated course environment and the challenging academic content. You begin to have

a clear sense that “you are on your own” in the course and if you need support, you will have to be proactive in finding it. After completing the first chapter of the course, you know the academic content will be a challenge. The first week of class required twice the amount of time that you allotted for the course. You realize you need to find extra time and energy for your HRC. You want to get the most out of the class. You need to make adjustments to your priorities and your schedule to insure you have the personal resources necessary to complete your HRC. You must be in control and in charge of your activities and actions to succeed. You need to ‘own’ the HRC. *Ownership* will allow you to complete the course with a sense of accomplishment knowing that you maximized your educational opportunity.

Ownership is the third structure of my study that describes one of the ways HRC participants responded to their experience. *Ownership* illustrates the ways that participants prized their HRC, and how they survived the demands of the course. *Ownership* is marked by two distinct elements that enabled participants to make the most of their educational opportunity and complete their HRC. The first is the positive stance that participants brought to their experience. Motivation, commitment, independence, self-direction, and resourcefulness emerged as qualities that framed the participants’ positive stance. The second element that defines the structure of *Ownership* is the investment they made in the class. Preparation, time, effort, focus, and organizational skills represented the investment of participants in their HRC. The stance of participants toward the HRC, combined with their investment in the HRC, enabled them to prize and own their experience. For some participants, *Ownership* of the HRC experience extended

to individual empowerment, allowing them to reap additional benefits beyond completion of the course.

Positive Stance

Motivation, commitment, independence, self-direction, and resourcefulness represented the attributes of *Ownership* that participants brought to their HRC. These qualities formed their positive stance and framed their experience in a way that allowed them to survive the hurdles and in some cases, excel in the course. Their voices illustrate how their positive stance contributed to their *Ownership* of their HRC experience.

Motivation. Motivation was foundational to the positive stance of participants as they approached their HRCs. Many described the source of their motivation as intrinsic, coming from within themselves. Personal goals, interest in the subject, and a passion for learning propelled participants to excel in their HRCs.

Kay maintained a positive stance within her HRC and she described the importance of motivation:

It takes a lot of motivation, to take time away from your kids after not seeing them all day and to let my mom step in to be mom for me ... It was hard sometimes, listening to life go on outside the bedroom door while I was tucked away after being at work all day. But, I got used to it, and I would try and look at the long term goal and what it is going to get you ... what keeps me focused and on track is my job and my children.

Kay kept her focus on her goal to complete her education. Completing her two HRCs was a part of that goal. She believed the short term sacrifices that she and her family made would reap dividends when she reached her goal. Kay also described a passion for learning that contributed toward her positive stance. She was driven to get the most out of her classes:

I don't want to pass ... I don't want to get into a class and get a 'C' because, I don't feel you are getting the most out of the class. Then, you are not learning. And I am not there to just get a degree. I am there to get an education.

Kay's motivation was propelled by her desire to learn. "It is me knowing that I did one hundred percent of what I could do and that I learned everything that I could learn." Kay was excited about what she was learning in her courses, and she prized her HRC experience.

Alyson's words aligned with Kay's as she talked about her motivation to do well in the course. "Once I find a sort of passion, it makes it easy. But if I really get into something, then I can become very self motivated. It is just my interest more than anything else." Like Kay, Alyson was interested in learning. "I like to read, a lot. I love to learn things. And I don't think of that as a chore. To me it's exciting." Alyson took her HRC as an elective toward her degree, "just because I knew that it would help me understand some things a little bit better. And now that I have taken it, I do see things in my work world that I wouldn't understand had I not taken the class." Alyson found her HRC to be "a very interesting course." She was interested in the content, and she was able to apply what she had learned in her job. The HRC had meaning for Alyson, and she was motivated to absorb all the course had to offer.

The motivation of participants impacted how they owned their HRC experience. Participants like Kay and Alyson, who came to the course with clear goals and high levels of interest, were propelled by their motivation. Commitment to the course and to personal goals was another dimension that contributed to the positive stance of HRC participants.

Commitment. Participants who prized their HRC placed the course high within other priorities in their life. They made sacrifices and balanced competing demands of work, school, family, and friends to honor the demands of the class.

The HRC was Keith's first online class. As noted earlier, he expressed a discord with the course content when he said, "HRC and me, we don't get along." He needed the course for his program of study, and even though it was not his preferred subject or learning environment, he persevered:

I started it, and I had to finish it. My time is very valuable to me. You are telling me I just wasted 4 or 5 weeks, and now I am going to have to come back and retake this class? I don't think so! I started it, I am going to finish it!

Keith was a mature student with a marriage, two children, a career, and clear educational goals. He was committed to finding a way to complete his HRC. In absence of the social learning environment that he favored, despite the obstacles, his sense of commitment carried him through course completion.

Geraldine demonstrated her commitment in another way. As a mature student with several advanced degrees, she was accustomed to approaching her courses with a sense of responsibility. She affirmed her commitment by saying, "I took it very seriously. Maybe partly because it was the first time that I had done this kind of course. I just knew I needed to keep up with the course." She shared how she did all of the reading and exercises in the course:

I just started up with the class. And it was an interesting experience. I don't know whether I did more work than anybody else. But it started off, with, very rapidly having to read about 400 pages of this book, this text about HRC. I had a thousand questions in my mind that I didn't know I had about HRC and I learned an enormous lot. And that was just nice. Of course, none of that was on any of the tests. So you didn't actually have to read any of that. But I am glad I did because it was something I didn't know.

Geraldine demonstrated her commitment to the course by completing all assignments even though not all of the material was required to pass the course. Her love of learning added to her commitment to complete her HRC.

The motivation and commitment of participants allowed them to make the most of their HRC classes. Independence was another personal attribute that contributed to the positive stance of participants.

Independence. Independence aided participants as they navigated the isolated and academically challenging HRC environment. It represented their ability to take charge of their experience. Their independence contributed to the *Ownership* of the HRC experience as participants embraced their HRC, and took control of their learning. The independence of participants contributed to the *Ownership* of the HRC experience.

Alyson said “I was raised to be extremely independent.” She added, “I take pride in my independence.” She tried very hard to work through the course and conquer the material independently. “I really tried to pull it out of myself more than anything which is why I didn’t really use the faculty resources.” Alyson stated, “I like being self-driven ... I like to work on my own instead of having someone stand over me and tell me OK, this is what you are doing. I just like for them to say, OK, this is what you need to do, and leave me alone.” Alyson’s independent nature aided her in meeting the demands of the HRC.

Samantha also acknowledged that her independence helped her in the online environment. “I am independent by nature anyway, so, it’s not a huge thing for someone to say, here is the book, you need to learn this. You read this chapter each week. I have no problem doing that.” As a mature, experienced, adult student, Samantha was equipped

with many of the needed skills to thrive in an online class environment. She was self aware, self-directed, and self-motivated to learn and to accomplish her goal.

Scott expected the need for independence in his HRC. He took responsibility for his own learning and saw his teacher “more like a facilitator” of the class. He explained, “I think [the instructor] has to create an environment where the student develops some independence. I mean [the instructor] can’t walk the student along, and I think [instructor] did a good job on that.” Scott was comfortable with the independence required to complete his HRC.

Independent qualities were beneficial to participants in the HRC environment and positioned them to approach their learning in a self-directed manner. Participants voiced the need to be in charge of their learning within the HRCs.

Self-direction. Self-direction represented the way in which some participants approached their learning. It required them to take control of their course and their learning strategies. Participants referenced personal qualities such as self-awareness, self-discipline, self-responsibility as contributors to their self-directed learning

Alyson realized that self-direction was needed to complete her HRC. She realized that she needed to be her own teacher:

I understood that an online course as difficult as my HRC would take twice as much time as it would in a normal on campus setting ... because you spend more time trying to teach yourself how to do the problems ... it is easier for someone to explain to you on the board and say this is how you do it ... and that is the typical classroom set up. So the HRC, because of the lack of lecture notes, we had to read the book, word for word, draw our own conclusions and understand it the way the book presented it. [The instructor] really did encourage you to learn on you own based on what was given to you. And it was sufficient information, it was just very time consuming.

Alyson anticipated the need to be in charge of her own learning, and she was able to employ the strategies necessary to learn the material and create a meaningful learning experience.

Carly was aware of the personal traits needed to succeed in the online learning environment and especially the need for self-direction. She experienced the reality of becoming her own teacher in the HRC when she said:

You know, you don't have a teacher in front of you putting problems on the board. So there is a lot of reading that goes into trying to find the processes. It is not all the numbers. They are going to have explanations because it is coming from books. So you have to be able to focus and get each and every word to be able to understand the problem ... if you are not disciplined enough to set a schedule, you can put yourself so far behind. Because, you say, ah, I'd rather go out tonight, or I'd rather not do it tonight, I'll do it tomorrow. No one is going to check my homework. All I know is that I need to have this quiz done by x date at midnight. But if you don't do the required reading and problem solving before that, you won't get to the quiz, or the test, or the exam.

Even though Carly did not complete her HRC, she had a clear understanding of the self-direction that was required to finish the course.

Tim and Sandy also discovered the need to be self-directed to accomplish the learning objectives in their HRC. Tim described his learning experience as "having to piece it all together myself." He explained further, "it was basically something that was all going on with me." Sandy explained that her instructor was not "linking the material very well. I remember things if I write them down. So, every chapter I would outline and then go through all of the problems. I thought that it was a lot of teaching myself."

Participants articulated the need to be self-directed learners within their HRCs. To complete the HRCs, they were required to 'teach themselves.' In addition to the need to be self-directed, participants also voiced the need to be resourceful to survive and thrive in the HRC environment.

Resourcefulness. Resourcefulness emerged as a personal quality that contributed to the positive stance of participants within their HRC experience. Geraldine said, “one thing I learned by taking an HRC, was really, what you need to learn, if you are patient enough, you can usually find your answers on your own. And that is good.” Scott also believed resourcefulness was needed to get the most of the HRC experience. He saw the potential for barriers when “just getting stuck on something and you don’t have any friends or anybody else who can help you with it.” He saw that the lack of resourcefulness might pose problems for students. “... you know if people are not used to making use of other resources available like I did. I just went to the library.” Scott found help from the college library staff to explain some complex concepts in his HRC. He was proactive in finding support when he needed extra help in challenging areas of his HRC.

Kay was resourceful as she progressed in her HRC. She found the instructions to a particular project unclear. The project required her to download free software to complete the assignment, and when she did, she found out that it didn’t have the features required to work properly. She explained how she went about resolving the problem:

And so I spent all of this time putting it together ... hours and hours at night and struggling ... I found out online that it didn’t have some kind of feature that was needed for the assignment. So I had to go into chat rooms and things like that to find out. So I came to find out, that is why I couldn’t get it to work, and that is why the step by step directions weren’t working for me. And then I was able to do it pretty quickly.

Kay was resourceful in finding the help that she needed to solve the problem independently and move on with the course. She was proactive in identifying resources when she needed help with her HRCs. She also described her employer as “100%” helpful and supportive. When she had questions or needed tutoring in particular HRC topics, she was able to solicit help from experts at her company.

Sandy also demonstrated resourcefulness as she progressed in her HRCs. Her issue was similar to the problem that Kay described. The instructions for an HRC project were confusing and inaccurate. She explained the resourcefulness required of her to complete the project:

I couldn't figure it out for the life of me. And it just didn't make any sense ... where this page was. I had no idea. And I found it on my own. I think I actually checked out 6 or 7 books from the library to do the project. Because the directions that [the instructor] had given, apart from the requirements for this [project] were the most confusing thing that I have ever read in my entire life. ... Once I got the books out of the library ... it made a lot more sense. I still don't know what the problem was. But I consulted three different people and six different books to figure that one out.

The example Sandy provided illustrated the resourcefulness required of HRC participants to complete confusing and difficult assignments.

The motivation, commitment, independence, self-direction, and resourcefulness represented the positive stance of participants that allowed them *Ownership* of their HRC experience. The way in which participants invested in their experience was the second essential element that contributed to their *Ownership* of the HRCs.

Personal Investment

Personal investment, the second dimension of *Ownership*, describes how participants allocated the resources required for them to meet the demands of their HRCs. Many participants were surprised by the time and effort required to complete their courses. They shared how they invested the extra time, extra effort, and total focus required by the HRCs. Participants described how their approach to preparing, organizing, and managing their resources contributed to their HRC experience.

Extra time, effort, sacrifice. Most HRC participants were experienced students. They were well aware that a certain amount of time, effort, and sacrifice was required to

complete any class. Some participants had online class experience, and they knew this environment often required extra resources. What came as a surprise to participants was that the HRCs required even more time and effort than they anticipated. With lives already filled with commitments, they had to make adjustments and reallocate personal resources to their HRCs.

Tim was an experienced and successful community college student, but someone new to online learning. When he enrolled in his HRC, he discovered the course required an investment of time and effort beyond what he anticipated:

I think it was just that this needed extra effort. And I couldn't even allow myself to be distracted, I just needed to attack this for a long period of time, because I really was all tangled up. ... I would just look at the book ... try to figure out what exactly was going on here and then maybe flip forward to the exercises and try a couple of the exercises just to make sure that I was getting it. And then flip back and say, why am I not getting this right? You know, what is going on? I ended up devoting a lot more time than I usually do. I usually get things ... I like to think I am pretty smart. But, it took a lot more study time than I am used too.

Other participants had similar experiences. Alyson, a seasoned online learner, described her HRC as “a very demanding class.” She discovered the course required her constant attention, something that she had to “work on every day or I would lose the understanding.” Alyson soon realized “an online course as difficult as my HRC would take twice as much time as it would in a campus setting ... because you spend more time trying to teach yourself how to do the certain problems.” She added, “once I understood that, I knew that I had to spend more time.” She described the effort that she had to put forth to understand the material:

The book came with a workbook and a sort of lab manual book ... so if you made it through the book, then the workbook, the lab manual, and did all of the quizzes and everything, and still didn't get it, then that would be the time to go talk with the teacher or get in touch with them somehow, but chances are, at least for me, by the time I got through all of that, it was kind of barreled into my brain ... it

forced you to go to the chapter and read it and it was necessary. And it was necessary to do the workbooks and everything. ... for me personally, I would work it and work it and work it until I got it. ... So the major obstacle is just getting past the point of thinking, well, I don't have to do all of this work, when you really do. ... it was just like, ok, do it!

Like other participants, Alyson found the extra time to devote to her HRC in short supply. She faced the demands of the course by making personal sacrifices and investing the time and effort necessary to learn the material:

A lot of people are not as willing to give up personal time, to put in 10 or so hours a week into a class. And I was one of those people. But, when I had to do it, to get through the class, it kind of became a really fun thing for me.

Alyson was willing to make the investment and sacrifices necessary that allowed her to get the most from her HRC.

Kay had a similar experience to that of Tim and Alyson. She discovered early that she had to invest added personal resources in her HRC. She described how she invested time and effort to learn the HRC material:

When I actually ... started reading the book, you couldn't just read it like it was a book. You had to really read it and do the exercises ... and think about it critically as you are going through the whole chapter. ... I learned from my son to make flash cards. So with the major points, I would put them on flash cards and take them out at work sometimes before a test to be sure I understood the concept or the equations. So that's what I would do with every chapter. And then go online and they had suggested exercises. That took a lot of time. So I would spend two hours doing that on one chapter. But if you didn't do the exercises at the end of the chapter, I think you really didn't get a full understanding of using the concepts that they were teaching you. ... if I kept up in the class, if I did the work in that chapter, that is when I got the A on the quizzes and the 100%, and that is where I really understood the concepts.

Kay's investment of extra time and effort allowed her to complete her HRCs with high grades and also make the most of her educational experience.

Keith was another participant who discovered his HRC required a greater investment than he anticipated. As discussed earlier, Keith was challenged by the

academic content of his HRC. At first he struggled to understand the material. Eventually, he was able to comprehend the content, but it took much longer than he expected. He described how he “had to go back and repeat things, and repeat things, and repeat things” until he understood. He learned that “if you don’t have the ability to sit down and take the time and figure things out, it can be very difficult.” He added, “so if I sat down and took the time and studied it, things made a lot more sense. But it just took a lot of time ... way more work than I anticipated.” His time was already committed, “considering the fact that I was carrying six other credits, [and working] 60 hours a week.” He described “deep frustration” and “high anxiety” when he realized the HRC would require almost twice the investment on his part. “What I thought was a five hour a week program, or five hours of studying for the HRC class, was ending up being 10, 12 hours a week, which the time, I didn’t have.” Keith made sacrifices and managed to find the time to meet all of his commitments and complete his HRC, “you just learn to manipulate your schedule to work things out.”

Geraldine and David agreed with other participants that extra time and effort were required for their HRCs. Geraldine said, “a lot of people think that an online course is going to be easier than going to class, and actually it tends to be harder.” She added, “I think, that was the case. That actually, I probably worked significantly more on this class than I would have on a [campus] class.” David echoed Geraldine’s remarks:

One of the things about an online class that is so different is the amount of time ... unfortunately, nobody tells you this. ... I think a disadvantage to online learning is that it does take so much more time. You are fooling yourself if you think you are going to save time in online learning. Because you are not. Because everything takes more time. It just does ... and I don’t think people know where that time is and why. Go ahead, take an online class, you will experience it!

Early in the course, participants realized extra time and effort was necessary to persist. They identified another dimension of investment necessary to complete their HRC. Not only did they need to find extra time and energy to invest in their HRC, they needed to do their work in an environment free of distractions where they could give the course their total focus.

Total focus. Participants had to create a study environment for themselves that was free of distraction where they could invest their total focus. As Tim said, “I couldn’t allow myself to be distracted.” Tim described how he found an environment that allowed him to concentrate on his HRC:

This stuff just required a focus that had to be aided by the environment ... I remember I had to kind of sequester myself in the bowels of [a nearby] library for a while just to figure it out ... I have this favorite spot way down in the news stacks, way over to the side. It’s really in the middle of absolutely nowhere in the library. And there is a window, even though it is tiny, it is nice to have some natural light ... you know, I said, I just got to figure this out. And I just plowed into the stuff again ... I spent most of my time there in the library trying to tease apart exactly what it was that we were assigned to learn and what it was that we weren’t.

Tim described a concentrated focus that was needed to comprehend the often complex and challenging content of the HRCs. Other participants echoed the need to insure they invested their extra time and energy in an environment that allowed to their total concentration.

Like Tim, Sandy carved out long blocks of time and created an environment free of distractions to aid her focus on her HRC:

I only worked on it when I knew I had ... 6 hours ... with this class. It wasn’t something where I could do a problem and then come back to it ... I would outline the chapter and then I would do the problems, immediately afterwards. And do it all in one block. That way, I understood everything. Rather than doing it bit by bit, and then having to go back. ... When I was taking that course, I did it with no music. I did it absolutely quiet. I just sat and worked through the problems all day.

I remember a couple times, I actually studied outside, because we had a courtyard. So I set up my lap top in the shade and worked there. It was always in a place where I knew it was going to be quiet, and I knew I was going to be by myself, and there weren't going to be any distractions.

Sandy was able to create a cohesive learning experience through her concentrated focus on the subject for long periods of time. She devoted a day off from work each week that allowed the kind of focus she needed to conquer the material of her HRC.

Alyson learned the HRC required her total focus in order to comprehend the material. She described the kind of investment that she made in the course:

Normally, I don't have any problem studying with music or the television on. But I found with this class that I needed full attention, towards the work. So I actually moved myself into a room that didn't have a radio or a television and it was just me and the books. I would sit on the floor and just do it, and three hours later I would finish. And [I would] be like, oh, three hours have passed, and I did all of this work!

The HRC was the first course where Alyson found the need to shield herself from outside distractions. She learned the value of concentrating her attention on her studies. "Since I've experienced that, I have separated myself from the noisy study area. I found that I am more efficient, and I am faster when I can do my homework when it is just quiet." Other participants reiterated the need to create an environment that allowed for total focus when completing their HRC studies.

Geraldine explained the work in her HRC was different from her other classes. "Other courses ... I can actually do in front of the television. I can mute the ads, I am in a comfortable place, and I can just do the next problem during the ad. ... But, this wasn't that way." Geraldine said the work was "more, sit down, read, underline." Keith echoed other participants need for total focus on the course and said he did his work when he "had nothing else to think about, nothing else to do, and just concentrate on figuring out

[the course].” Carly also described the attention her course required where she had to “know all of the parts of my brain were focusing on this so that I could get each and every step, because with HRC, I need steps.”

The HRCs required a level of concentration that involved extra time, effort, and an environment free of distractions. Participants learned that in order to complete the course requirements, they had to make the personal investment. To make this investment, participants had to make good use of their time and resources. They did this through planning, organization, and management of their resources.

Resource planning, organization, and management. HRC participants realized that in order to effectively use their extra time and effort in a place where they could focus, purposeful planning, organization, and management of their resources were required. Several participants shared their strategies.

Samantha found that she needed to employ strong organizational skills as she navigated her HRC. She found time management critical to her success. “I really had to get my calendar out at the beginning and write down everything that was due so that when I was looking at my week, I wouldn’t forget. Because there isn’t that reminder.” She added, “you really do have to stay on task. I can see how easily it would be to either forget you are in school, or just not be prepared to set your time aside.” Samantha also found that she had to plan for the unexpected, such as a sick child or other emergencies. She took the opportunity to work ahead in her course just in case a family need surfaced.

Alyson carried 18 credits the semester that she enrolled in her HRC. She also worked part-time. She started her semester with a structured plan. She applied her organization and time management skills to include a set time allotment for all of her

classes. She carefully planned out the work in her HRC. “I had a set schedule of things that I was doing for that class. I would read the chapter, then take notes on the chapter, and then answer all of the questions in the back.” In addition, she took advantage of all of the course resources available to her. “I pretty much used all of the online and book resources that I could.” She explained how her planning helped her to learn. “I copied all of the examples that they had in the book on my own paper ... it’s really easy for me to learn something ... if I can just write it down ... it puts it in my head.” Through careful planning, Alyson was able to utilize the resources available to her and get the most out of her experience.

Geraldine also entered her HRC with a strong organizational approach. She shared how she went about organizing her work:

I created a three ring binder. And I printed out all of the stuff. And I made little sections for each week of the course. And then for each of the big assignments, I had a section for that. So, I would just print out all of the assignments and any information that they gave or that I needed. So, it was very well organized that way.

The semester that Geraldine took her HRC it was her only course. She pointed out, “And when you are only taking one course, you can be very thorough. So I ended up with a ton of information. Probably much more than what I needed.”

Kay was not as fortunate as Geraldine. Along with her HRC, she had another course, a full-time job, and family responsibilities. Kay’s time and energy resources were limited and an organized approach was essential for her. A single mother of two, returning to college after several years, it was important to her to keep her life manageable. She shared how she maintained balance while completing her HRC:

I am glad that I did start off slowly. I just got into a routine ... normally, I would try and do a chapter a week. And it was easily done. I would start out on the

weekend maybe like I said, doing the slide show, starting the chapter on Saturday. And during the week I was reviewing and doing more exercises ... all those hours to commit to doing the exercises and if there was an online quiz, getting ready for that, and also doing a little bit more of the topics in the chapter. ... It's a juggle ... so you can do well with everything. You really do try to find what works best for you. ... What works for me is staying up in a class, having structured time, and being disciplined.

Kay found a pace with her HRCs that worked for her. In addition to her weekends, she used smaller blocks of time during the week to complete her work, "I tried to spend my lunch hours at least three times a week. ... I would commit to doing three lunch time study sessions, away, you know [child] is not there, [where] she is not a distraction for me."

Like other HRC participants, Sandy's time was at a premium. Sandy said she carried 13 credits during the semester of her first HRC, and she worked a full-time job.

She explained how she managed:

I try to get all of my school work done during the week. I am focused on getting my work in that certain frame of time. ... I worked on the weekends ... Friday and Saturday night I worked, and those days were totally out for school work. And then Sundays, because I was working in a restaurant, I was just way too tired. And Sundays were just not an option. And then during the week, I worked four days. ... I had one day during the week that I had off. So I dedicated that day always to doing my online class studies. And HRC took up a lot of the time actually. It was just ... so involved ... I wasn't expecting it to be tedious, like that. ... I took notes for all the chapters. I remember things if I write them down. So every chapter I would outline and then go through all of the problems. I didn't expect to put that much into it, but I was kind of glad for it because I learned a lot.

Sandy's description of the tediousness of her efforts to complete her HRC studies mirrored that of other HRC participants. As Alyson said, "it was necessary" to carefully read the textbook, take notes, complete the workbook assignments, and use the course resources. The tedious, time consuming nature of the work required careful personal resource management.

Scott's time management skills were fine tuned, and he was expert at utilizing his resources. He said, "Often times, with an online class, you can do a little bit at a time. I mean, I have my schedule in my head. I know exactly when something is due and when I will have the time. Especially when it requires chunks of time." Scott was also aware of time bandits, and he exercised self-discipline, "I turn things down. Parties come along, I might go for an hour and then go back." He knew the importance of preserving the time he needed to complete his HRC.

Participant voices illustrated how the HRCs required careful planning, organization, and management of resources to persist and complete the course. Their ability to stay organized, manage their time, and remain in control of their course contributed to their *Ownership* of their HRC. As participants took *Ownership* of their HRCs through their positive stance and personal investment, some also articulated how they were empowered by the experience.

Individual Empowerment

As participants developed the qualities necessary to survive and thrive in the HRC environment and invested their personal resources, they were able to reap intrinsic benefits from their experience. *Ownership* of the HRCs led to empowerment for some participants.

When Samantha learned about online learning from her friend, she recognized an opportunity to get an early start on her future plans while tending to the needs of an infant and three growing children. Online learning was the conduit that Samantha needed to pursue her education and future career goals while nurturing her young family. Her access to higher education hinged entirely on her ability to complete her online courses.

The opportunity to access higher education from the comfort and convenience of her home was empowering for Samantha. As I noted before, Samantha shared there was “no way” that she could have returned to school without online courses. The online courses created the access for Samantha to get started in her education at an earlier point in time. This access empowered her to get on with her plan. “Having a plan is one thing, actually getting into it ... it’s great! I am not going anywhere, but I am in school! I am going towards that goal. So that was really uplifting and positive for me.” Samantha’s personal stance and investment in her HRC not only allowed her to take *Ownership* of the course but also the direction of her life.

Alyson earned an “A” in her HRC. Her independence, motivation, and self-direction allowed her to take immediate *Ownership* of the class. She said the experience in the course allowed the chance to “test” herself to see if she could learn in a self-directed manner. She said the experience left her feeling “really self-confident knowing that I can teach myself.” She knew, “if I wanted to learn something on my own, that is not guided by a teacher, then I would be able to do that.” Alyson saw the online class as “an opportunity because you can learn so much about who you are ... I didn’t know who I was when I started. ... It’s not the same as being in a regular class, you don’t have a teacher. If you need information you actually have to draw it out of yourself.”

The HRC empowered Alyson. “I realized that I would be ok teaching myself whatever it was that I was going to learn.” The course also gave Alyson the confidence to pursue an advanced degree online. “...now that I know how to solve my problems on my own and think different ways to get to where I need to be I would feel much more comfortable participating in an online degree program.” The experience also increased

Alyson's already independent spirit. She summarized the benefits of her experience in the course as an opportunity:

to know about yourself ... to understand how to work in society ... to learn how you can function on your own ... how you can use the information you have and figure out what to do ... so when you go out into the workforce, and you don't know how to do something, you don't have to ask your boss to give you a 10 minute explanation on how to do something ... It really does teach you [how to fill] in the blanks of life.

Kay completed two HRCs and her experiences were empowering for her. After several attempts to pursue her degree over more than a decade, she was filled with hope and excitement about her goal to graduate and transfer from SCC. "My goal is to get my degree ... and transfer in fall 2008. I want to have all of my courses completed. I am really trying to push myself, but at the same time, I am not over doing it where I am not learning anything, and I am just doing the coursework." Kay said her HRCs were "good experiences." She was empowered to know that she was able to do well in courses like her HRCs. The flexibility offered by online learning allowed Kay to keep up with all of her responsibilities while attending classes. "... it let's me juggle everything. And maybe have a chance at success." The opportunity for Kay to pursue her education empowered her to transform her life.

Summary of Ownership

My participants demonstrated *Ownership* of their HRCs in two ways: their positive stance and their personal investment. Their positive stance was represented by their motivation, commitment, independence, self-direction and resourcefulness. They illustrated how they employed these qualities to survive and thrive in their HRCs. As Kay said, "It takes a lot of motivation to take time away from your kids after not seeing them all day." Keith described the commitment of HRC participants when he said, "I started it,

and I had to finish it.” The “independent nature” described through the voices of Alyson and Samantha, propelled the self-direction and resourcefulness of HRC participants. Participants who brought motivation, commitment, independence, self-direction and resourcefulness to their HRC were equipped with the positive stance needed to complete the HRCs. Those without such resources were not able to complete their HRCs.

The investment of extra time, effort, and focus was required to excel in the HRC experience. Participants found that their HRCs required more time and effort than they planned to invest. To comprehend the material participants had to “work it and work it and work it” as Alyson stated or as Keith remarked, “repeat things, and repeat things, and repeat things.” Participants who were able to make the investment were able to advance in their course and complete it with a positive outcome. For some, completing the HRC meant more than added credits to their transcript. They were empowered by the experience to realize their goals and change their lives.

Acquiescence

Introduction to Acquiescence

You’ve been enrolled in your HRC for a few weeks. The isolation that you feel is very real. You know you are “own your own” with “no instructor” and you wonder if you will be able to cope. You find the course content difficult; you do not understand the material. You do not ‘get it.’ You realize you may need the help of others to comprehend the subject. You ask yourself, ‘is the isolation something that you can live with or do you need interaction with others to complete the course?’ The HRC requires considerable time, effort, and focus. Your work, your other classes, your family, and your friends all require your attention. The competing demands within your life require that you prioritize

and make choices on how to invest your personal resources. After a short time in the HRC, you know the course will require more from you than what you anticipated. You feel pressed to meet your obligations. You ask yourself, with all of your other commitments, where are you going to find the time, energy, and focus necessary to complete the course? Can you withstand the isolation? Can you make the necessary sacrifices? You know you have to make choices. You search for answers.

As participants searched for answers to these questions, some responded with *Ownership*. Others responded by making subtle compromises and silent submissions to their HRC experience. Some totally gave up on the experience and withdrew from the course. I chose *Acquiescence* as the word to describe the fourth structure of my study. *Acquiescence* describes the response by participants that is the opposite of *Ownership*. *Ownership* represents the ways in which participants controlled their learning experience. *Acquiescence* tells how participants gave in to the HRC. It represents the ways in which participants made subtle compromises, silent submissions, and slowly surrendered to the HRC experience.

Silent submissions were seen in the lost motivation and lackluster commitment of participants. Participants were drawn into acquiescence through their interdependence on others. When they realized diminishing returns from the investments they made in their HRCs, they gave up on their experience. *Acquiescence* was also seen in participants who compromised their standards and their desired learning environment as they continued with their HRC. When participants surrendered to the HRC experience, some were left with a sense of loss that stirred feelings of resentment. While *Acquiescence* reflects the

retreat of participants from their HRC experience, many participants responded to their retreat with resolve.

Acquiescence was seen through the subtle compromises, silent submissions, and slow surrender of participants in their HRC experience. The participant voices that follow illustrate *Acquiescence* as the fourth structure of my study.

Silent Submission

In subtle ways, participants submitted to the demands of the HRC experience. The silent submission by HRC participants emerged as their lost motivation and lackluster commitment to their course. It was seen in their interdependence that was not supported by the HRC. Participants made their final submissions when their investment in their HRC did not reap returns.

Lost motivation, lackluster commitment. Participants were drawn toward acquiescence when they lost motivation and commitment for their HRC. David was candid about his lost motivation. “I honestly believe it was a much harder challenge for me to do the HRC. I found the time that I was putting into it was less enjoyable. Yes, that certainly has an effect on my motivation.” The frustrations that David experienced to grasp the HRC content impeded his motivation to succeed and ultimately led him to withdraw from the course.

Lost motivation also led Tom to submit to his HRC. He said, “Motivation is a very big issue for me. I did not have the motivation. I did not have a clear understanding that I needed to do all of these courses to get out of SCC.” Tom added that because his goals were not clear, “I wasn’t focusing on the end result. I was just focusing on the then and there.” Tom explained how the lack of interaction dissuaded him from being active in

the course. “You do your little whims and things, add a discussion note here, send an e-mail there ... you can kind of keep yourself away from the course. With me, I lost the motivation for the course.” Tom found the interaction in his campus classes more motivating, and he “chose to focus on different things. I chose to focus on my classroom studies versus my online studies.” Without clear goals, Tom was not able to maintain the motivation to complete his HRC.

Helen admitted that her low motivation for the course led to procrastination:

I would not approach the course until the last minute. I would take care of the family, I would take care of the house, the animals, work, three courses, and then HRC. There was not time for HRC at the end. I am like, ok, I will do it when all of these things are done. When all the other things were done, I was either too tired, or there was not time.

The root of her procrastination was her lack of interest and dislike for the subject matter. Helen chose her HRC as an elective. She said she did “very little research into the course.” Helen saved her HRC work for last because it was her “least favorite. Anything dealing with HRC. I avoid the things I don’t know, and I avoid what I am afraid of. I just hate HRC. It drives me insane, it is so boring.” Helen also admitted that her commitment to the HRC was lackluster. She knew when she signed up for 13 credits during the summer semester, she was taking on a lot. “All these people were saying [taking] 13 credits during the summer is insane.” Helen added, “I went in this with the understanding that OK, if it doesn’t work, if I am taking too much time away from the other priorities in my life, then, one of them has got to go.” The HRC became the lowest priority for Helen and when “the time didn’t exist at all” to devote to the course, she “pulled out.” David, Tom, and Helen lost their drive and their will to persist in their HRC. Without motivation and the commitment, their acquiescence was inevitable.

Interdependence. Some participants were interdependent on the support offered by campus classes. This interdependence contributed to a level of discomfort in the HRC. The set time for classes in a physical place, along with interaction with their instructor and other students, enabled them to progress in their campus classes. Those who had other online class experiences were accustomed to course designs that provided for a robust interactive experience that supported their needs. When participants were faced with the HRC environment, some were unable to respond to the independence and self-direction required to progress. They were taken back when their needs for support were not met. Tom, David, and Julie were three participants whose interdependence on others was not met within their HRC. This void discouraged them as they gravitated closer toward acquiescence.

Tom found that without the face-to-face contact with an instructor, he had difficulty staying on track in his HRC. He said he intended to keep “a regimented schedule” of study in his HRC. In reality, he admitted, “I don’t really keep myself on that track doing online studies.” Tom said the HRC was especially difficult for him. “I don’t have a physical class that I have to go to ... I don’t have a professor to sit and look at and be judged by.” It was easy for him to ignore his HRC and do other things. Tom said, “and that is what I did.” He realized that he could have used strategies to stay on track. He admitted he could have made “modifications to my study habits, such as reading the textbook aloud or using a tape recorder.” Tom said he “just didn’t use that as a viable option.” He realized that he did not have the self-direction required for online learning, and it was not his preferred learning environment. “I don’t think that I will be taking any more online courses ... I prefer being in the classroom.”

David was frustrated when he was not able to find the help he needed to progress in his HRC. He said, “I also felt disheartened ... I had gone up [to SCC] a couple of times to find no kind of help.” David went on to explain things would have turned out differently if only he had been able to understand the content. “It would have been all good, and then I could have just kept on truckin’ along. But, unfortunately, it wasn’t like that for me.” He added, “I wish there was some kind of instructional assistance or frequently asked questions.”

Julie was another participant trapped by her expectations. She was an experienced online learner, and she was familiar with the independence and self-direction that was required. She had good experiences with previous online courses and expected to have a positive experience with her HRC. Her self confidence was undermined as she got started in the course. “I realized from day one, that I wasn’t going to get it. I mean, I knew, as soon as I opened the book and saw what the class was going to be like. I told my husband, I just need to go ahead and get out of this class now.” Determined not to give up, she continued on with the course. In other classes, Julie found the online interaction with her classmates and her instructor a source of support:

Learning from other students, as well as from what the instructor is providing for you, and the textbook. To me, that is a huge learning thing ... and a huge obstacle to try to overcome ...with not having contact with other students. It is an online class, but it is not an independent study class.

The format of her HRC provided Julie little opportunity for social interaction in the online classroom and minimal interaction with her instructor. The online HRC classroom was not a place where Julie felt she could turn for support to succeed. As Julie reflected on why she didn’t do well in the course she said, “there wasn’t the instructor help that there could have been, and there wasn’t the student community help that there could have

been. You know, it was out of my comfort zone.” The HRC environment was overwhelming for Julie. “It is one of those classes where I am going to have to be physically in the classroom, and be told and shown how to do it.” She acknowledged that “the reason for withdrawing was that I just didn’t get it.” She found the course structure similar to an independent study where she was left on her own to figure it out, which she said, “isn’t how I learn.”

Tom, David, and Julie were in need of resources and support that did not exist within their HRCs. They did not have the level of independence and self-direction required to advance in the HRCs. When their interdependence on the external support of others was not met, they gave up trying to complete their HRC.

Diminishing returns. The choice of participants to enroll in the HRCs required an investment of money, time, and energy. A withdrawal from the course meant they would lose their financial investment and reap nothing for their time and effort. Participants carefully weighed their decision to withdraw from their HRC. When they saw diminishing returns, they gave in to the HRC and withdrew from or failed the course.

Carly began the semester with a plan of how she would use her time. Her plan did not include the extra time, energy, and focus that her HRC required. Initial technology challenges caused by the incompatibility of her personal computer and the HRC course software left her feeling behind in the course. She explained this hurdle. “It had already set me behind ... so now I was playing catch up.” As the semester progressed, Carly began experiencing the crunch of time. “The conflict came where one of my classes was spilling over into the next.” She found her humanities class taking longer than she expected, and she found it encroaching on the time she had allotted for her HRC. She had

to make choices on how to spend her time. “If I wanted to do my [HRC], I’d have to slow down on my humanities; but then I’d be missing out on whatever it was that we needed to discuss Thursday.” In addition to her classes, competing demands that permeated her life required her to make decisions on how to use her time. “I have a full-time job, and then, I want to have a social life.” Not willing to give up her discretionary time for the added demands of her HRC, there simply was not enough time for both her humanities class and her HRC class. Carly had to make choices on how to balance her personal resources. Withdrawing from her HRC was her solution.

Tom was another participant who struggled with competing demands in his life. He was unprepared to invest the time and effort necessary to complete his HRC. He was critical of himself for his lack of investment. “Effort and time ... yes, I could have put more time into it, absolutely.” Tom was confident in his abilities. “If I just take more time to it, nine times out of ten, I can figure it out easily. It is just having that time to do it.” Tom also explained how his full schedule competed for his energies. “At that point, with everything going on in my life, I didn’t have a lot of spare mental processes to spend on that.” Tom explained how he prioritized his time. “I did more volunteer activities, some more on work, and focused less on my schooling and education.” He added, “it was either take time from work, and by that I’m reducing my paycheck, and I can’t pay for all my bills all at once ... drop the volunteer [activities] which is always an option for me, but I’d already put so much work into it, I didn’t really want to.” His choices put him in a position where he was “having difficulty keeping up with all of the assignments.” In addition, Tom acknowledged that learning online was distracting for him. During his study time he was tempted to explore the Internet in ways unconnected to his HRC. “That

was a distraction. I would do research for something else, go shopping online ... hey, OK, well, there is a game online. Let me go play that, versus, staying on the computer, focusing on my studies.” He compared the online environment to the campus classes. “There are lots of competing demands [compared] to when you actually are going into a classroom. There is nothing there to distract you. You are totally focused on your class.” He shared how sitting in the classroom can be different. “I am not distracted by ... the computer there to play video games ... not distracted by having an online conversation with someone ... instead, I am sitting there in the classroom, focusing on the professor and what [instructor] is having to say, writing down notes.” Tom enrolled in two HRCs in different semesters. He found many aspects of the online environment unappealing. He chose not to adapt to the HRC environment, and he chose not to make the necessary investment to progress. His choices forced him to withdraw from one HRC and fail the second.

David decided to withdraw from his HRC when he realized his investment of time and energy were not affording him the desired return on his investment:

It was just taking me a lot of time. That was a growing source of frustration for me because I knew the more time that I was putting into HRC, the worse my grade was getting ... the more important that time was to me to be able to put into other [classes] where I was strong. I also knew that I wasn't going to get everything done that I needed to get done. And when it came down to cutting my losses, I decided the least thing that I would be losing was my HRC grade. ... And it was a difficult decision for me to say, oh, you know, I will drop it here, but I knew it was just more and more and more work for me to do and I also knew that I had other classes that I really wanted to get the best grade that I could ... I wasn't going to have the time to do it [all].

Knowing his investment was producing diminishing returns, David said withdrawal from the HRC was “the best thing for me ... I felt like it was going to get harder, in the second half.”

Helen found herself in a situation similar to David. She had taken on more than was realistic for the summer semester given everything else that was happening in her life. Shortly after Helen completed her first test, she found the commitment required to complete her HRC exceeded what she was able to invest:

I realized what damage I was doing to the people I care about. And I realized that my school priorities were becoming more important to me than my family relationship priorities. ... I realized that I could finish that second test, and I could finish the course, but I may lose a very important relationship to me. And, I might not be the mother that I should be to my child. ... So, I backed it off. ... That is why, I just finally cut HRC. ... It was just too much. And, I took 9 credit hours instead. Which actually worked out much better.

Helen had to evaluate her priorities. She felt that the extra time and energy required to complete the HRC would compromise her personal relationships. At the time she was enrolled in her HRC, Helen had to place her personal relationships above her academic goals. Withdrawal from her HRC allowed her to reestablish balance in her life.

Julie, like David and Helen, found herself at a point of diminishing returns. She invested more time and effort than she had planned during the first few weeks of her HRC class:

I found myself taking more time than I have with other courses. More time away ... where I would usually sit and watch my boys' practices or games ... I was taking my book and studying, and taking notes and stuff while I was doing things with them ... already putting 20 to 25 hours into it. I mean, I couldn't put anymore time into it. I was to the point of going to bed later. I was getting up earlier, trying to fit time in. ... You know, I've got kids, and I still have to be a mom. That is absolute first.

Julie knew the time and effort required to succeed in the online class was more than she could invest. "I just couldn't, you know. I wanted to put my whole self toward it instead of just a few hours a week. That's not me at all, to just struggle by ..." Julie did not reap any rewards from the time and effort that she invested in her HRC, and she felt pressed.

“I tried and tried and tried to get the basic concepts ... it was just terrible. Julie was unprepared for the rigor of the course and the time and effort required. Wanting to succeed, she said, “So, ok, I will give it my absolute best shot.” Julie was not able to make progress. She cut her losses and withdrew from her HRC.

Silent submissions from Carly, Tom, David, Helen, and Julie led to their decision to surrender to the demands of their HRC and withdraw from the course. Their lost motivation and lackluster commitment led them to *Acquiescence*. Interdependence, not supported by the HRC, further reinforced their need to yield to the demands of the course. When their investments did not reap returns, they believed withdrawal from the experience was their only choice. *Acquiescence* was more subtle for other participants. While it did not represent a complete withdrawal from the experience, participants were aware of the compromises they made.

Compromise

Compromise represents an element of *Acquiescence* experienced by participants who completed their HRCs, but admitted they made concessions to survive the experience. They settled for an undesirable experience as a way to complete a requirement or apply credit to their transcript. Keith, Samantha, Scott, and Geraldine provided the voices of compromise.

While Keith completed his HRC, he calculated his investment in the course. During the semester he was enrolled in his HRC, Keith carried nine credits while working 60 or more hours each week. He made a conscious choice to compromise his standards to meet all of his commitments:

You have to figure out what your commitment is. You have to decide if you are going to be an “A” student, or are you just going to pass the class? I still don’t

know my grade. I didn't pay attention to it. It is posted. I know I passed. I went on down the road. But, to say, do I study two more hours and get an "A" for my GPA? Or, do I know, if they gave me the exam now, I will pass? And, it came to a point, that I just said, I'll pass. Ah ... never done that in my life ... Never done that in my life, say I'll pass and that's good enough for now ... I'll go on.

Keith was apologetic for the compromise he made. It was a choice he had to make to complete his HRC. Along with his job and his family, Keith had priorities that superseded the grade that he earned in his HRC. He also had two classes at the campus in addition to his HRC. He adjusted his priorities to insure that he was able to complete all three classes. He was proud to share that he earned "A's" in his two other classes.

The appeal of online learning was compelling for Samantha. In so many ways, it fit her lifestyle and enhanced her world. It provided the access she needed to get started on her academic and career goals while maintaining her responsibilities to her family. Yet, Samantha was vocal about her dissatisfaction with both the quality of instruction and classroom interaction. She recognized the important role of her classmates and her instructors to her educational experience. She found the lack of interaction in her HRC to be inadequate. She said "not feeling connected" was a huge obstacle for her. Even though Samantha found her HRC less than ideal, she was willing to compromise. The online format of her HRC allowed her the access she needed to move forward with her educational goals. While it was substandard in her mind, she acknowledged online courses to be a "very easy way" to access her education, and she was "thankful that it is online." Samantha was content to complete a prerequisite required for her application to SCC's nursing program, even though it was "not a very enriched experience." As she said, "I am checking my box. And I am happy to do it." For Samantha, the compromise

was easy to make because of her need for online course delivery. “I am thankful that it is online because like I said, it is a lot more convenient, I can do it at my own pace.”

Scott’s focus on earning his degree propelled him to complete his HRC despite his disappointment in the course. He described his HRC as “kind of lame.” He was disappointed in the lack of interaction in the class and the way in which the content was presented. He went on to say “maybe it was because I had five or six other classes. And I have way more interest in other subjects than learning HRC.” Scott compromised his standards by pursuing a class that he felt was uninspiring because he needed the course to complete his degree. The HRC was a convenient way for him to finish the requirement.

The HRC was Geraldine’s first online class. She believed that the “interaction among students is EVERYTHING” in the classroom. Geraldine was disappointed to discover “there isn’t any of that” in her HRC. Yet, the course served her purpose. The HRC allowed her to complete a requirement for her degree while she maintained her travel plans. Geraldine was aware of the compromise that she made. “That is the price that you pay for the convenience of not having to go to school.”

Geraldine’s comment, “the price that you pay” speaks to the compromise HRC participants made when they submitted to less than desirable conditions in their courses. For Keith, Samantha, Scott, and Geraldine, the benefits of convenience provided by the online delivery, outweighed the undesirable elements of the class.

Silent submissions and compromise led participants into the realm of *Acquiescence*. For some participants, the retreat was temporary, and they simply felt regret. Other participants had a lasting encounter with *Acquiescence*, and their retreat led

them to withdraw from their HRC. Either way, when participants reached the boundaries of *Acquiescence*, they articulated a sense of loss.

Loss

Loss permeated the voices of participants who withdrew from their HRCs. Loss was also heard from those who felt their education experience was compromised by enrolling in an HRC. Their expressions of loss emerged in themes of defeat, shame, and resentment.

Defeat. Participants who were not able to complete their HRC came away from their experience feeling defeated. They struggled to complete their assignments and pass their tests. In the end, they were defeated by their HRC. The participants' agony was heard in their voices.

As the semester progressed, Carly continued to spend more time on her humanities class and less time on her HRC. She found herself getting behind in the HRC. As the last date to withdraw from the class without grade penalty approached, she realized she had to make the decision of whether or not to stay enrolled in the class. Throughout the semester she made the choice to keep up with the assignments in her campus humanities class. She found her limited resources of time and energy insufficient for the demands of both classes. She said with the HRC, "I'd need that time and then some." She described her conflict and her decision. "I got myself in deeper, where I couldn't catch up, because I had to read all of this. I just realized, unfortunately, I did want to pursue the (HRC) class, because I wanted to get it over." But as the withdraw date approached, she realized "it was beyond" her.

Julie persisted in her HRC for the first several weeks of the course. She struggled with the content and realized, “I wasn’t going to get it.” She described her anguish during that period of time. “Oh the stress level! I am not a stressful person. I tend to take everything in stride and figure that is the way it is going to be. But, I have never been so stressed as I was then.” She gave the course a lot of effort for the first few weeks, and then realized, “ I started slowing down about a week before I withdrew.” She thought to herself, “If I can’t do this, maybe I am thinking too hard. If I am thinking too hard about it, maybe I just need to back off a little bit and see if I am making it harder than it is. And yea, that didn’t work either.” Julie gave up on her experience and withdrew from her HRC.

As Tom began his second HRC, he said, “I started getting into it. I realized I had probably ended up making a mistake in taking it, but decided I need the course, let me go ahead and stick it out, let me see what I can do with it.” He told himself he wanted to try to complete the course, but he failed to invest the time and effort necessary. As time passed he reflected on his loss. “I came to learn the hard way.” He explained that if he had known what was required of his HRCs in advance, he may have made different choices. “I probably would have geared my mentality toward the online courses a bit differently. May have been a little bit more successful ... might have not enrolled in the first place.” After two unsuccessful attempts at HRCs, Tom realized online learning was not for him.

David added his perspective. “I was just sitting on a ‘D’. I knew that I was underperforming. To come back when I feel like I am underperforming I am less inclined to fix that. I would rather focus on things where I am doing good.” When David lost his motivation to continue in the course, he admitted his defeat.

Helen was very aware of what was happening to her during her HRC experience.

She was explicit about her feelings of defeat:

I dead-lined. You know, you see the television shows where somebody's heart is beating really fast without having a heart attack and things are just going off the charts ... And then they just dead-line. And it is over. I dead-lined. And I had to give up some of it. I hit the threshold of my capabilities. And it was a good learning experience. I pulled out of it and the stress went away and everything worked out.

Helen, like Carly and Julie, described high levels of stress as they tried to continue in their HRCs. For these three participants, the only way to relieve the stress was to admit defeat. For some participants, defeat turned to shame. They articulated the shame that accompanied their defeat.

Shame. As a group, the HRC participants were accustomed to succeeding in their courses and accomplishing their goals. When they had to withdraw from their HRCs, they were embarrassed and humiliated. They expressed the shame that they felt.

When Carly withdrew from the HRC she was disappointed, scared and embarrassed. She expressed her feelings:

I just felt like, am I ever going to get past [the HRC]? Is it going to be the death of me? When people see it on my record, are they going to think that I couldn't cut it? Or you know, had I bitten too much off?

Carly needed credit for the HRC to complete her degree requirements. When she withdrew from the course she was ashamed. Her HRC experience undermined her confidence to complete her educational goals.

Julie described the withdrawal from her HRC as "devastating." The challenges that she experienced that led to her withdrawal left her feeling humiliated and embarrassed. She explained, "We are the type of family where a 'C' is not an option. We

try to be an 'A' and 'B' family." She felt as if she had let down her children by not succeeding in her HRC:

I was embarrassed. When they asked me, Mom, what happened? Why aren't you doing your homework? When I withdrew from the (HRC), I was really ashamed to tell them ... just the look on their faces. What, you dropped out? And then I saw the look on their faces, and they are starting to think, can I drop out? I don't like social studies, can I drop out of social studies? So again, that was embarrassing and hurtful for me, with them.

David chimed in with other participants. "I didn't want to withdraw. I have enough withdrawals in my SCC career. I didn't need to have another one." He was painfully aware of his loss. "I knew that I had paid for it, I knew I didn't have the money to pay for it, and I didn't want to face the failure of oh yea, you wimped out, you washed out."

When participants were forced to withdraw from the HRCs their retreat to *Acquiescence* left them feeling ashamed. For some participants, shame led to resentment.

Resentment. Resentment emerged in participant voices when the access afforded by the HRC turned into a barrier. Julie entered the course with high hopes of making progress toward her educational goals. She lost hope when she had to withdraw from her HRC. "I was excited to see [HRC] there. Once I had taken it, I was like, why do they offer that online?" Julie was disappointed to learn that what she thought was an additional access point to be able to get everything for her degree online, was now a barrier.

David was resentful that he was not forewarned about how challenging the experience would be. He voiced his feelings about his experience:

And I mean, I went in and I spoke to three different counselors for different things and they all saw what I was taking and none of them were like, so let's talk it out, you know, what have you got going on? You know, are you working? ... What are you thinking?' yea ... I felt like none of them were giving me that kind of advice ... And I don't want to come across as angry, but damn it, you could look

at my transcripts and you could see that I am a returning student who hasn't been in school for ten years. You should be able to see, just sitting down with me that I really feel ambitious about this. You could also say, you know, what is going on with you? ... You got to hear my story! You got to be like wow, this kid's got some road ahead of him. I didn't get any of that. I feel resentful in that SCC is just saying, give me your money!

David felt vulnerable and blindsided. He was bitter about his experience and he wished he had been better informed before he made the decision to enroll in his HRC.

Samantha expressed her resentment by questioning institutional responsibility in administering online courses. She was disturbed when she found the grade book in the course management system set to dates in a prior semester. "I think the teacher needs to look like [he/she] is taking it seriously too ... which is why when you see your toolbox showing your grades with last semesters due date ... I think that is poor form." Samantha believed the instructor should have created more interactivity by being involved in the discussion board. She felt instructors should emphasize "this is very serious what we are doing. This is how it is going to be, and I want to hear from you." She found the void of interactivity disturbing, and she wanted to have her instructor more involved. "Possibly answer some of those threads and get involved as a teacher." Samantha was bothered by the lack of involvement by the instructor, that she did not get feedback on assignments, and that the course management system dates were incorrect. "I am not saying 'oh it's great. I am doing this online and my teacher never checks in and its great' ... I am paying the same amount as if I went to the class. I expect some feedback!" She added, "and have the dates right!" The entire experience caused her to question institutional responsibility and the legitimacy of the online instructor's role. "You know is this an actual class that they are really teaching? Are they paid the same for this class? Or is it more just an extra thing?" She asked, "With the online class ... I have to keep my time management, are

the teachers also supposed to be keeping their time management?” She felt as if she was expected to be accountable, and she expected the same from her instructor. Samantha felt cheated by her HRC experience.

While some of the HRC participants expressed their resentment about elements they believed were missing, they demonstrated resilience to their experience. Even though some had a retreat with *Acquiescence*, it did not dampen their spirits. They found ways to reframe their experience and move on with their goals.

Resolve. Acquiescence from the HRCs left the students with a sense of loss. As each explored their circumstances, they individually found resolution. Some vowed never to take the HRC in an online environment. Others believed that with an adjustment of priorities and work load they would be able to find success in the HRC.

Tom was very aware that the online environment was not the best match for his interests and motivation. “I have determined that online courses aren’t necessarily always the best thing for me compared to being in a classroom ... even though I don’t really like having to be there every single day.” When Tom tried to complete one of his HRCs, he noted, “And after doing it for sometime, and after that meeting with the professor, even then I realized, it was probably not the best choice to stick with it ... that I probably would have done better in a classroom setting.” Tom realized, “Online courses are appropriate for many people, they are not appropriate for me.” Tom’s HRCs experiences taught him that campus classes were the best way to meet his educational goals.

Keith knew what he liked and how he learned best. “I know I like college. I like to learn. I like the classroom. I did not have a positive experience. I could tell you, yea, I learned this, I learned that. But it wasn’t what I like.” He found that it “just wasn’t very

positive” and he left with the course with “a bad taste.” Even though in many ways the online environment was appealing to Keith, he was so disillusioned that he said he would not consider another online class. “Forget it. I will just take my time off from work, take my vacation, and take my lunch hour. I will sit in class and go on.” He valued the quality that social interaction with his instructors and other students brought to his learning forum. He was disappointed to find this type of contact missing in his HRC. Even though the flexibility of the online environment was perfect for his busy life, his dissatisfaction was so strong that he was not willing to take a chance on another online class. Knowing what he needs from the classroom, Keith said he will not take a chance on another online class. “My time is more valuable than to see if I will get a positive experience. I’d much rather invest my time in a class and get something out of it.” Keith was adamant that the HRC was the first and last online course for him. “I will never take another online class.”

Julie’s experience with her HRC made her realize that she needed to be selective about the classes that she would take online. She encouraged her children to “put forth everything that they have.” Even though she was ashamed and disappointed that she had to withdraw from the class, she did feel that she had given as much as she could. “Knowing that I had done that, I didn’t feel so bad, you know, as if I had not given it my over all effort.” Julie’s experience in her HRC opened her eyes. It made her think critically about the online classes that were most suited to her learning style:

It has made me a little leery of the classes. I had a preconceived notion that if it was an online course, that I would be able to do it. You know there is another [HRC] class ... oh my goodness, do I want to take that online? And I’ve decided not to. It is just going to have to be one of those courses that I save for the end when I have actually got to go to a classroom setting. So yea, it has really changed my mind about what I will take online. Withdrawing from the HRC, I am more gun shy of what I think I can do. ... Just because they offer it online, doesn’t mean you are going to be able to do it!

Julie did not let the setback of one course dampen her spirits. "I would encourage everyone not to be afraid to take an online course. You have your huge HRC hurdles and things like that, but if it is the only way you can get back to school ... I am just a firm believer in continued education." The experience allowed Julie to make realistic choices about the classes that she could take online, and those where a campus setting was a better match to how she learned.

Even though Carly withdrew from her first attempt at her HRC, she remained optimistic that the online environment was right for her to complete her degree requirement. The experience taught her about the focus and commitment required for the course. She learned what she needs to do to complete any future HRCs. "I could not do something else that required a lot of thought with that class. Because it required so much focus, and so much attention, and discipline." She knew that she will need to take the HRC alone, or along with something else "that's a breeze with it, because you need a lot of focus, because it's such an independent study." The experience provided her with self-awareness of her limitations, as well as what she needs to do to succeed. "It really bothered me that I had to withdraw. But, I know what it takes, and I can do it again." After time to reflect on her experience, she regained her hopefulness and planned to try the HRC again.

Helen was disappointed that she was unable to complete her HRC but she did not let one setback cloud her spirits. She expressed her resolution by saying:

It is ok to mess up every once in a while. It is ok not to have perfect scores because you are juggling a million things. I don't consider it lowering expectations. My expectations out of every course are to do the best I can, not to make a perfect score. Do the best that I can, learn what I can, take from it what I can, and then apply that in my life and teach others if possible. Not to make a

perfect score. So I don't think that is lowering expectations, it is changing expectations. And it is expecting that yes, I am doing the best that I can do.

Helen was proud of what she was able to accomplish in spite of the withdrawal from the HRC. "It is a challenge. I wish that on my resume I could put the fact that I am a single mom juggling these things. Because I think I that I have learned so much more than some people can even imagine." Helen did not let the setback of the HRC get in the way of her goals and she was determined to meet them:

I am 30, I am a serious learner, I have goals and I aim to meet them. And I will meet them, you know, whatever it takes. And you know, if whatever it takes, included 13 credits this summer ... ok, that wasn't realistic. It is a small step back. Yes, I am not going to quit, I will take that in the fall. We are going to change things around a little, so that I am not juggling so much at one time. But, we are going to finish this.

Helen was determined to meet her educational goals. She was aware of the personal qualities needed to succeed in online courses. "It takes time management and acceptance. Accepting the fact that if you are taking 13 credit hours in one semester, and you are unable to finish one, it is ok." Helen planned to reenroll in her HRC in a future semester.

Summary of Acquiescence

Acquiescence emerged as a structure that describes the ways in which some participants responded to their HRC experience. *Acquiescence* represents the subtle ways some participants submitted to their experience. When they lost motivation and commitment for the course, they silently surrendered to the experience. Some were not able to adjust to the independence and self-direction required to complete their HRC courses. The retreat to *Acquiescence* was imminent when their investment in their HRC did not reap tangible rewards. The HRCs caused some participants to feel as if they compromised their standards when they found an environment that did not meet their

expectations. *Acquiescence* represented the ways in which participants gave in to their experience. While the encounter with *Acquiescence* was brief for these participants their concessions were lasting. The silent submissions and subtle compromises left participants with a sense of loss that they expressed through feelings of defeat, shame, and resentment. The HRC participants escaped *Acquiescence* through their resolve. Some participants realized they needed to accept the concessions they made as the price they paid for the convenience of their HRC. A few learned that they needed to make adjustments in order to complete the HRCs in the future. Others realized that they were not suited for online learning and indicated that in the future, they will only enroll in campus classes.

Part 2 Summary

Participant voices merged to form four structures that defined their lived experience within the HRCs. *Isolation, Academic Challenge, Ownership, and Acquiescence* emerged as the structures that defined their experience. A synthesis follows to show how the four structures framed the HRC experience to form the meaning and essence of the phenomenon.

Part 3: Textural Structural Synthesis

Introduction to Textural Structural Synthesis

The structures of *Isolation, Academic Challenge, Ownership, and Acquiescence* intermingled in discrete ways to frame my study, *The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles*. Participants faced *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* as they experienced their HRCs.

Some responded to the *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* through *Ownership*, others responded through *Acquiescence*.

Isolation describes the loneliness participants felt as they experienced their HRC. It illustrates the vacuum of the HRC classroom, the lack of student-instructor interaction, and the void in student-to-student connections. Participants found little support for their learning within their HRC classroom, and they were forced to turn to outside resources when they needed help. *Isolation* tells of the participants' struggle to find ways in which to connect with their HRC, and it reflects how many felt alone, adrift, and abandoned.

Academic Challenge articulates the overwhelming feelings of participants as they faced their course content and delivery. *Academic Challenge* was heard as participants described their unrealistic expectations for the course, the difficulty of the academic content, the complexity of course structure, and frustration with technology. The *Academic Challenge* of the HRCs was compounded by the cumulative nature of the content. To progress, participants needed to grasp and understand the course material in sequential order. When they were unable to keep pace with the course, they became lost. Participants experienced an unexpected resistance as they navigated the *Academic Challenge* of the HRCs.

Ownership portrays how participants prized their HRCs and how they embraced the demands of the course. It marked their positive stance toward the HRC and the investment they made in their class. Motivation, commitment, independence, self-direction, and resourcefulness emerged as personal qualities of *Ownership*. Preparation, time, effort, focus, and organizational skills represented the investment participants made

in their HRC. The stance of the participants toward their HRC, combined with their investment in the HRC, enabled them to prize and own their experience.

Acquiescence represents the ways in which participants slowly gave in to the loneliness and the demands of HRC experience. It reflects the silent submissions and the subtle compromises made by participants that led them to relinquish *Ownership* of their HRC experience. Silent submissions were seen in their lost motivation and their lackluster commitment. Some participants were drawn into *Acquiescence* through their interdependence. Other participants compromised their standards and their desired learning environment. Several gave up on the experience when they saw diminishing returns from their investment in their HRC.

The four structures of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* intermingled in ways that framed the HRC experience. Participants responded to the *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* through their *Ownership* and *Acquiescence*. The interplay of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* emerged in positive and negatives ways that led participants to survive or surrender to the HRC experience.

Survival or Surrender

As participants journeyed through the HRCs they came upon a crossroad that led to their survival of the course or their surrender to it. Participants who completed their HRC spoke about the conviction that led to their survival. Those who withdrew from or failed the course shared of the struggle that led to their surrender. As the structures of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* interfaced, four dimensions emerged that characterized the experience of participants: (a) empowered

survivors, (b) compromised survivors, (c) reluctant surrenderers, and (d) misplaced surrenderers.

Survivors maintained *Ownership* of the experience in ways that allowed them to complete their HRCs. Survivors experienced their HRCs in two ways, ‘empowered’ or ‘compromised.’ *Ownership* allowed *empowered survivors* to respond to both *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* in positive ways that allowed them to fully engage in their experience. *Compromised survivors* retreated to *Acquiescence* as they responded negatively to *Isolation* and compromised their desire for an interactive, connected environment. Their positive response of *Ownership* to *Academic Challenge* equipped them with the personal qualities needed to complete the course.

Acquiescence dominated the response of surrenderers in ways that prevented them from completing their HRCs. ‘Reluctant’ and ‘misplaced’ describe two ways participants surrendered to the HRC experience. *Reluctant surrenderers* responded positively to *Isolation* through qualities of *Ownership*. As these participants faced the demands of *Academic Challenge* they responded negatively and relinquished their *Ownership* to *Acquiescence*. *Misplaced surrenderers* responded negatively to both *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* as *Acquiescence* encroached upon their HRC experience. The total *Acquiescence* of these participants severed their commitment to their HRC, and they withdrew or failed their course.

Discussion follows to portray the empowered and compromised survivors and the reluctant and misplaced surrenders. Their experience shows the discrete ways in which the structures of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* interacted, leading HRC participants to survive or surrender.

Empowered Survivors

Empowered survivors responded positively to both *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge*. Empowered survivors brought *Ownership* qualities to the HRC that allowed them to navigate *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* to create a satisfying and engaging HRC experience. They embraced their experience in ways that afforded them control. These participants not only survived the experience, they excelled despite the obstacles.

Empowered survivors were autonomous and able to resist the *Isolation* of the HRC experience. They responded to *Isolation* with a positive stance marked by the qualities of *Ownership* that they brought to the experience. Their independence, self-direction, and resourcefulness enabled them to proactively solve their problems and minimize their need for support from their classmates or their instructors. Their motivation to reach their educational goals kept them focused. They were quick to respond to the *Academic Challenge* by allocating additional needed personal resources of time, energy, and effort. They planned, organized and managed their work and their time. They adjusted their personal priorities and made necessary sacrifices. These attributes allowed them to employ active learning strategies and become self-engaged in their HRC.

The *Ownership* brought to the HRC by these participants left them in command of the class in a way that allowed them to honor their commitment and prize their experience. They were rewarded with high grades in the course and were satisfied with their HRC experience. They left the class feeling empowered, knowing that they were able to learn on their own. Their purpose of gaining access to higher education through online courses was realized as they survived and thrived in their HRC experience.

Compromised Survivors

Compromised survivors responded negatively to *Isolation* and positively to *Academic Challenge*. They resisted the *Isolation* of the HRC environment and through *Acquiescence*, conceded to their desired levels of interaction in the course. They responded with *Ownership* to *Academic Challenge* and made the investment required to complete the course. While these participants survived the HRCs, they compromised their preferred learning environment and expressed their dissatisfaction in their experience.

Compromised survivors valued contact with their instructors and their classmates. They found the lack of interaction and feedback unacceptable. They were disenchanted with the *Isolation* of the HRC. They expected a classroom with strong faculty facilitation and lively student discussions. They wanted a venue where they could learn collaboratively with their classmates and receive feedback from their instructors. *Acquiescence* permeated their voices as they lost hope for a meaningful student-instructor relationship. The lack of emotion associated with cryptic responses in electronic communication created a cold classroom climate for the compromised survivors. They settled for an undesirable experience as a way to complete a requirement and apply credit to their transcript. They viewed the compromise as the price they paid for the convenience of an online course.

Even though compromised survivors were disappointed with their HRC experience, their motivation and commitment to their goals allowed them to meet the *Academic Challenge* of the course. They demonstrated *Ownership* of the experience by investing the time, effort, and focus required of their HRC. They planned, organized and

managed their resources. They demonstrated independence, self-direction, and resourcefulness. Their motivation and commitment allowed them to complete their HRC. Compromised survivors learned what they needed to learn at the price of an enriched and engaging classroom experience.

Reluctant Surrenderers

Reluctant surrenderers responded positively to *Isolation* and negatively to *Academic Challenge*. They were comfortable with the *Isolation* of the HRC and responded through qualities of *Ownership*. Reluctant surrenderers were unprepared to make the investment necessary to meet the *Academic Challenge* of the HRC. *Acquiescence* overshadowed their *Ownership*, and they disengaged from the course.

Reluctant surrenderers brought qualities of *Ownership* such as independence, self-direction, and resourcefulness to the experience that prepared them for the *Isolation* within the HRC. These participants were proud of their independence and discounted the need for interaction with others and outside support. They did not find collaboration with classmates or interaction with instructors necessary for their learning experience. Some welcomed *Isolation* because it protected them from the social embarrassment of a campus class when they struggled with difficult course content. The HRC allowed them to self-pace and avoid feeling rushed.

When reluctant survivors were faced with the *Academic Challenge* of their HRC, their *Ownership* turned to *Acquiescence*. They were overwhelmed with the investment required to meet the demands of the *Academic Challenge*. They were confident in learning the material in a self-directed manner, but were caught off guard by the investment that was required to complete the HRC. They viewed their withdrawal from

the HRC as a temporary setback. The reluctant surrenderers believed they were capable of surviving. They believed they were in the right place at the wrong time. They realized ways in which they needed to realign their priorities and obligations to complete the HRC in a future semester.

Misplaced Surrenderers

Misplaced surrenderers responded negatively to both *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* as *Acquiescence* dominated their HRC experience. Misplaced surrenderers were unequipped to navigate the obstacles they discovered in their HRC. As the *Isolation* and the *Academic Challenge* intensified for misplaced surrenderers, *Acquiescence* became more pronounced. They were in the wrong educational environment and were unable to navigate the HRC experience.

Misplaced surrenderers were distraught by the *Isolation* of the course. They were interdependent. The lack of interaction with other students and with their instructors was debilitating. Their experience was further compromised when they were unable to meet the *Academic Challenge* of the HRC. They needed support that was missing in their HRC. Access to external learning assistance was out of their reach. The *Isolation* and the *Academic Challenge* combined in a way that prevented a meaningful classroom experience. Misplaced surrenderers struggled to understand the academic content. Their investment of time and effort resulted in diminishing returns. They lost their motivation to survive and responded with lackluster commitment to their course. Their hope to complete the course disappeared and they silently surrendered to the experience. The voices of misplaced surrenders were filled with expressions of loss as they described their

defeat, shame, and resentment. When they withdrew or failed their HRC, they felt denied the promise of access to higher education promoted by online courses.

Part 3 Summary

The experience of HRC participants was framed by the distinct ways in which the structures of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* interfaced. The HRC experience was defined by ways in which participants responded to the structures of *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge*. The response of participants to *Isolation* marked the quality and satisfaction of their experience. Participants who responded positively to *Isolation* with *Ownership* were satisfied with the HRC experience. Participants who responded negatively to *Isolation* with *Acquiescence* expressed dissatisfaction with their experience.

The survival or surrender to the experience was marked by participants' response to *Academic Challenge*. Participants who responded positively to *Academic Challenge* with the qualities of *Ownership* survived the HRC experience. Participants who responded negatively to *Academic Challenge* through *Acquiescence* surrendered to their HRC experience.

The interplay of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* led participants to experience their HRCs in four different ways:

1. Empowered survivors responded positively to both *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* with *Ownership*. These survivors described an enriched, self-engaging, and satisfying experience.
2. Compromised survivors responded negatively to *Isolation* through *Acquiescence*. They met *Academic Challenge* with positive qualities of *Ownership*. While these

survivors met the demands of their HRC, they were disappointed in their experience and expressed regrets over the lack of engagement in their class.

3. Reluctant surrenderers responded positively to *Isolation with Ownership*, but they responded negatively to *Academic Challenge* through *Acquiescence*. They were satisfied with the HRC environment but were unprepared to make the investment necessary to survive the experience. They planned to reenroll in the HRC at a different time.
4. Misplaced surrenders responded negatively to both *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* through *Acquiescence*. They were unable to establish meaningful engagement, and they could not meet the demands of the HRC. They surrendered, disappointed and dissatisfied.

These four distinct ways that participants experienced the interplay of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* within their HRC, led to the essence of my study.

Part 4: Essence

Introduction to Essence

Delicate Engagement emerged as the essence of my study as I reflected on the lived experience of HRC participants. I thought about the empowered and compromised survivors, and the reluctant and misplaced surrenderers. I was reminded of the personal qualities they brought their HRCs and how these shaped their experience. Their strength, resilience, vulnerability, and fragility were woven together in four unique patterns that formed the fabric of their HRC experience.

As I thought about the different patterns of the HRC experience, I reflected on the unique textures that contributed to their experience. I remembered a spider's web that appeared on my front porch one summer morning. The web stretched across the two pillars of the porch just outside my front door. I was intrigued by the fabric of the web, and I stepped toward it to have a closer look. In the center, I saw the spider carefully spinning the fibers, methodically weaving a unique pattern into the fabric of the web. I looked more closely at the texture of the web. The fabric was woven tightly. It appeared strong and resilient. I looked away from the center toward other areas of the web. While the spider's meticulous pattern continued, the weave gradually loosened as the web stretched away from the center. The fibers at the fringe of the web appeared thin and frail, and in some places barely touched the pillars of the porch. I stepped back and looked at the entire web. I could see the delicacy of the fabric as it stretched from pillar to pillar. The vulnerability of the web became apparent to me. I observed the strong texture at the center where the spider was busy at work. At the edge of the web the fabric appeared fragile, and reflected less of an investment by the spider.

The spider's web intrigued me. I wanted to know if my observations were true. I knew I had to touch the web to find my answers. Conscious of the delicate fabric of the spider's web, I cautiously reached toward the center of the web. With the tip of my index finger, I gently touched the web. I quickly pulled away. I was concerned that I may have damaged the spider's web. I reexamined the area where I had touched the web. It was intact. I was relieved that I had done no harm. I looked at another part of the spider's web just past the tightly woven area. I gently touched a more loosely woven fiber. I quickly pulled my finger away and inspected the spot that I touched. I saw a dent in the web's

pattern, but the fabric remained intact. I continued my investigation. This time, my finger drifted farther toward the perimeters of the web. I touched a spot far from the center of the web, but not quite at the edge. Again, I carefully placed my finger on the web. My gentle touch broke a few of the loosely woven fibers and left a hole in the web. I regretted the damage that I had done, but I was relieved to see that the fabric around the hole was still intact. I continued my inquiry. I studied the loosely woven fibers at the fringe of the web. The fibers were thin and frail, barely connecting the web to the porch pillars. I gently reached toward the fragile threads. I barely touched the web. This time, when I pulled my finger away, a piece of the web broke. The fabric of the web was reduced to a few frail fibers on the tip of my finger. My touch destroyed this area of the spider's web. I stepped back and looked across the entire web. My finger met each area of the web with equal pressure, but only some areas of the web tolerated my touch. I realized my interaction with the spider's web was a *Delicate Engagement*.

I returned my thoughts to the experience of the HRC participants. I saw a likeness in their HRC experience, and the touch of my finger to the spider's web. My finger was like the HRC. The fabric of the spider's web resembled the qualities that HRC participants brought to their experience. In the same way the spider spun the web, the HRC participants wove together their personal qualities to form the fabric that shaped their experience. The fabric of the spider's web tolerated my touch in different ways. In the same way, the personal qualities woven into the fabric of the empowered and compromised survivors and the reluctant and misplaced surrenderers framed the four dimensions of the HRC experience.

The texture at the center of the spider's web was tightly woven. It was firm and strong, it endured my touch. The fabric mirrored that of the empowered survivors. Like the spider busy at work in the center of the web, empowered survivors were in control of their experience. The fabric that they brought to the HRCs was strong and resilient, tightly woven together with qualities of *Ownership*. Marked by a positive stance and personal investment, empowered survivors were equipped to sustain the touch of *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* within the HRC environment.

The fabric of the spider's web just outside the core was not as tightly woven as the center. The texture in this area was less dense than the center, yet the fibers tolerated my touch. The small dent left by the touch of my finger reminded me of the delicacy of the spider's web. Compromised survivors brought this same texture to the fabric of their experience. *Ownership* gave strength to the fibers of their fabric that allowed them to overcome the *Academic Challenge*. Their dissatisfaction with *Isolation* weakened their fibers, leaving them at the border of *Acquiescence*. Even though they wove into their fabric the qualities necessary to complete their HRCs, these weakened threads left them with a tainted feeling. Like my finger's touch at this area of the spider's web, the dissatisfaction they felt blemished the fabric of the compromised survivors.

My finger pierced the spider's web in an area located far from the center but not yet at the edge. In this place, the fibers were thin and loosely woven together. Yet, the surrounding area remained intact. This area of the spider's web reflected the texture of the fabric held by reluctant surrenderers. The texture of their fabric was vulnerable. Reluctant surrenderers brought some elements of *Ownership* to their HRC experience that allowed them to tolerate the *Isolation*. Their fabric lacked the personal qualities to

face the *Academic Challenge* of the experience. Their retreat to *Acquiescence* damaged their HRC experience. Even though their HRCs pierced a hole in their fabric, these participants were determined to find ways to mend the hole and reweave their fabric in a way to survive their HRCs at another time.

At the edge of the spider's web were the weakest and most frail fibers. When I touched this area, the web broke apart, leaving the thin threads on the tip of my finger. The fabric of the misplaced surrenderers reflected this area of the spider's web. *Acquiescence* dominated the fibers that created the texture of their fabric. The fabric of the misplaced surrenderers disintegrated to frail fibers as it met the HRC environment. These participants were not resourced with the necessary elements to meet the HRC experience.

The empowered and compromised survivors, along with the reluctant and misplaced surrenderers, were like the carefully woven spider's web. For those who survived the experience, the texture of their fabric mirrored the strong and resilient fibers tightly woven together at the center of the spider's web. A loosely woven texture formed the fabric of the HRC surrenderers. The texture of their web was too weak to sustain the HRC environment, and they did not complete their course.

The texture of the spider's web framed the lived experience of HRC participants. The vulnerability of the web to the touch of my finger reflected the risk involved in the HRCs of my study. The voices of participants represented in the structures of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* reflected the textures found in the fabric of their HRC experience. The interface of participants with the HRC content and environment was like my touch to the spider's web, a *Delicate Engagement*.

Delicate Engagement

Delicate Engagement describes the essence of my study. It tells of the ways in which HRC participants made meaning of their learning through academic and social connections. Like the web of a spider, the connections were strong, resilient, fragile, and vulnerable as participants interacted with others and the course content. *Delicate Engagement* speaks to the strength and resilience of participants who brought *Ownership* to their experience, embracing the *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* of the HRCs. *Delicate Engagement* also represents the fragility and vulnerability of those who retreated to *Acquiescence*, unable to respond to the *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* of the HRCs, and ultimately surrendering to their HRC experience.

Delicate Engagement describes the vulnerable threads of academic and social connection that permeated the experience of HRC participants. It represents how only a few were able to sustain the lack of contact with others. For many, this void impacted the quality and satisfaction of their learning experience. They valued interaction with fellow students and with their instructors. Without meaningful associations, many participants expressed dissatisfaction. Connection to the HRCs was fragile, and for some the engagement was too delicate to retain their involvement.

The *Delicate Engagement* began as participants entered their HRC classroom. They found themselves in a vacuum. It was a place without space, it was invisible. The classroom was silent and void of life. There was only a phantom presence of anyone or anything. Participants found themselves in a classroom that felt barren, cold, and surreal. They found themselves in *Isolation* having to experience the course in solitude. They were unable to establish meaningful interaction with other students or with their

instructor. Interaction with classmates did not exist. There was no opportunity to work together, to learn together. Participants felt neglected by the limited interaction with instructors. The frail strands of human connection left some participants feeling alone, adrift, and abandoned. The *Isolation* deprived many participants of the social engagement they wanted or needed for a meaningful learning experience.

The *Delicate Engagement* was compounded by the *Academic Challenge* of the HRCs. Participants found the *Academic Challenge* overwhelming and beyond what the environment could support. The needed amount of individual effort was unexpected; the investment was difficult to make. The academic environment did not provide convenient or accessible support for learners. The expectations of participants did not match the reality of the HRCs. They believed the academic content would be easy to understand. Instead, they found concepts unfamiliar, complex, nonintuitive, and cumulative. Some participants were unable to keep pace in learning the sequentially ordered content. They felt left behind and lost in their course. Confusing directions and technical hurdles added to the challenge experienced by participants. Many participants were left feeling anxious, threatened, and frustrated by the *Academic Challenge*. The *Academic Challenge* added frailty and vulnerability to the already weakened threads of the *Delicate Engagement*.

Ownership provided strength and resilience to the fibers of the *Delicate Engagement*. Those who were able to respond to the *Isolation* and the *Academic Challenge* with *Ownership* survived the *Delicate Engagement*. Motivation, commitment, independence, self-direction, and resourcefulness increased participants' chances of survival within the *Delicate Engagement*. Preparation, time, effort, focus, and organizational skills allowed participants to respond to their experience with resilience.

As the *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* intensified, *Ownership* gave way to *Acquiescence* for some participants. The strong and resilient cords that held together the *Delicate Engagement* were reduced and replaced by frail and vulnerable threads. Human interdependence was not supported within the HRCs. The void of interaction with instructor and classmates undermined the already frail threads of engagement of HRC participants. The complex and difficult content presented barriers that some participants were unable to overcome. These barriers further weakened the connecting strands of the *Delicate Engagement*. The silent submissions and the subtle compromises of *Acquiescence* threatened the vulnerable and frail threads that held together the *Delicate Engagement*. The strands of *Acquiescence* were too weak for some participants to survive the *Delicate Engagement*, and they surrendered to their HRC experience.

Part 4 Summary

The essence of the lived experience community college students enrolled in high risk online courses was a *Delicate Engagement*. The subtle ways in which the structures of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* intermingled formed a *Delicate Engagement* for HRC participants. The *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* dominated the HRC experience in ways that dissuaded an engaging classroom experience. HRC Participants met these prominent structures with *Ownership* or *Acquiescence*. Those who brought the strong and resilient threads of *Ownership* to the *Isolation* and the *Academic Challenge* of their HRC experience, survived the *Delicate Engagement*. As *Acquiescence* overshadowed *Ownership*, fragility and vulnerability weakened the strands of the *Delicate Engagement*, and participants surrendered to the *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* of the HRC experience.

Conclusion

Phenomenological research methods allowed me to hear the voices of the thirteen participants to gain a holistic understanding of how these community college students collectively experienced their HRCs. Chapter 5 follows to show how these findings address my research questions and how the results of my study can apply to practice and further research.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, OUTCOMES, RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

Chapter 5 presents a summary of *The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles*. Through my study, I examined the lived experience of students who survived their HRCs and those who surrendered to them. My examination allowed me to look holistically at the lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs. In my study, I was able to identify both the opportunities and the obstacles that they encountered. Following are the research questions that guided my study:

1. What is the lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs?
2. What are the opportunities experienced by community college students enrolled in HRCs?
3. What obstacles face the community college students enrolled in HRCs?
4. What other factors or conditions contribute to the lived experiences of community college students enrolled in HRCs?

To address my research questions, I collected data through in-depth interviews with 13 community college students who were enrolled in HRCs. Three participants had experience in two HRCs which allowed me to collect data from 16 course experiences. I listened carefully to each individual voice as they shared thoughts, feelings, and stories of their experience. I analyzed the 13 interview transcripts according to methods outlined by Moustakas (1994). I discovered elements of the experience unique to each individual

while also hearing the commonalities in their experiences. I identified the shared elements of the participant voices and organized the data into four major structures that defined their common lived experience. *Isolation, Academic Challenge, Ownership, and Acquiescence* described the four structures that defined the lived experience of community college student enrolled in HRCs. *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* described how and what participants experienced. *Ownership* and *Acquiescence* explained how participants responded to their HRC experiences. The four structures intermingled in unique patterns that emerged in two ways that described how participants survived the experience, and two ways in which participants surrendered to the experience. Empowered survivors and compromised survivors described participants who completed their HRCs. Reluctant surrenderers and misplaced surrenderers described participants who withdrew or failed their HRCs. The interplay of the four structures merged to form the essence of my study, *Delicate Engagement*. Answers to my research questions emerged as the structures of *Isolation, Academic Challenge, Ownership, and Acquiescence* met to form the *Delicate Engagement*.

Chapter 5 is organized in four sections. In part 1, I provide a discussion to address my research questions. I state my assumptions and biases and tell the reader what was validated and what has changed. I relate my findings to the research questions. In part 2, I return to my literature review and examine relationships to my findings. In part 3, I provide my perspective regarding the outcomes of my study. I offer my recommendations for both practice and research through suggestions for practitioners and students along with possibilities for future research. In part 4, I conclude with my closing comments and reflections.

Part 1: Findings Related to Research Questions

The universal question that guided my study was “What is the lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs?” I designed the study with the goal of learning both the opportunities and the obstacles of HRC participants. Apart from the opportunities and obstacles, I also wanted to remain open to learn about other factors important to the experience of participants. To begin the discussion of how my findings relate to these questions, I first provide my reflections about my assumptions and biases as a researcher.

Researcher Assumptions and Biases

Researcher reflection and clarification of biases is essential in phenomenological study. In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument through which data are collected (Merriam, 2002). The background and perspective of researcher are reflected inductively throughout the inquiry. It is therefore important to note the assumptions and biases of the human instrument who conducts the research and generates the findings.

I came to the study as an experienced community college practitioner. I had worked over 10 years as a community college counselor. In addition, I had over five years experience as an administrator of support services to community college students. As I developed my study, I noted my assumptions and biases. My experience told me that students who succeeded in online courses were highly motivated, organized, and disciplined. I also expected to hear that lack of time was a primary reason for withdrawal or failure of the online course. I entered the study thinking that academic preparedness would impact learning outcomes. My practical experience and study of the literature guided my interview protocols and prompted me to look for underlying reasons why

participants did or did not complete their HRCs. While I am aware that my professional background and study of the literature brought assumptions and biases to the study, my understanding of both theory and practice allowed me to see the multiple dimensions of the student experience. As I listened to participant voices, many of my assumptions were exposed. Some were validated, others dispelled. This allowed me to take my inquiry to a deeper level.

As a human research instrument, it is only natural that some of my dialog with participants may have prompted them to respond in a particular way. Given my professional background and experience with community college students, I was aware of the constant need to keep my assumptions and biases at the forefront. Following the phenomenological research methods of Moustakas (1996) provided a process for me to clarify my assumptions and biases as I engaged with each participant. Moustakas described the process as *Epoche*. As stated by Moustakas, “In the *Epoche*, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowing, are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (p. 33). As I prepared to meet with each participant, I consciously engaged in *Epoche*. I continued the process as I conducted my data analysis. *Epoche* provided a process for me to separate myself from my professional role, and it allowed me to engage with my participants as a researcher with a fresh perspective, open to learn from them.

Findings: The Lived Experience

The first research question examined the lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs at a universal level. I addressed this question in detail in

chapter 4 as I explained the intricate ways in which the four structures of the phenomenon interfaced to form four different experiences.

The four structures, *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence*, emerged through the common elements of participant voices as they told the stories of their lived experience in HRCs. These structures interfaced in ways that framed the experience of participants. They responded to the *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* through their *Ownership* and *Acquiescence*. The interplay of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* emerged in positive and negative ways that led participants to survive or surrender to the HRC experience. Their stories of survival and surrender to the HRCs told of both the opportunities and obstacles that they experienced. Following are the opportunities and obstacles that I identified as participants told their stories that defined the *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* that led to the essence of their experience, *Delicate Engagement*.

The opportunities and obstacles experienced by HRC participants emerged through their stated purpose, their preparation, and within the structures of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence*. The themes within the structures illustrate both the opportunities and obstacles of my findings of the HRC experience. A discussion follows.

Findings: Opportunities

Flexibility of Time and Place

Participants voiced obvious opportunities as they stated their purpose for enrolling in HRCs. Regardless of their outcome, the key advantage of the HRCs was as one participant described, “Flexibility, flexibility, flexibility.” The flexibility of time and

place provided opportunities for participants to progress toward their educational goals. For some, the HRCs and other online courses were their only access to higher education at that particular point in their lives. For others, these courses allowed them to accelerate their educational programs. Online classes provided scheduling convenience for many participants, allowing them maximum flexibility for family, work, and outside commitments. The flexibility of time and place was attractive to some HRC participants because of their need for geographic mobility. The flexibility of time and place offered HRC participants access, acceleration, convenience, and geographic mobility.

Flexibility in Learning

While the HRCs presented participants the advantage of when and where they learned, it also offered opportunity in how they learned. They expressed their ability to control the pace and style of their learning in their HRCs and other online classes. They were able to advance quickly through material they had mastered and spend their time and effort on less familiar concepts. The HRC environment enabled participants to adapt their studies to their personal learning style. They found new and different ways to learn their material that were inhibited by a traditional classroom. Participants also explained they were able to work ahead in the course allowing them to better adjust to personal or family needs, travel schedules, or social obligations.

Preparation

All HRC participants entered their courses with the minimum prerequisites outlined by the institution. Institutional safeguards were in place to ensure prerequisites were enforced as participants enrolled in their HRCs.

Course Background and Experience in Subject Matter

Participants who had academic background or applied experience in the subject matter expressed a comfort level with the material. Those who had similar subjects in high school or worked with related material had an added advantage within their HRCs. These foundations allowed participants to more easily connect with and integrate the content.

Course Orientation

Participants who were able to take advantage of specialized HRC orientation programs that were specific to course content found opportunity in understanding expectations and in making important connections with instructors. They valued these exchanges and expressed appreciation for this initial effort on the part of instructors that made a difference to their learning experience.

Technology Skills

Participants savvy to online tools, communication modes, and course management systems expressed confidence in navigating their HRCs. Competence in technology allowed participants to maximize their HRC experience.

Support for Learner

Family, friends, and employers provided participants with needed support that allowed them to cope with their HRC experience. Family members cared for children while participants completed course assignments. They were the cheerleaders to promote participants' educational goals. Family members were tutors when participants experienced academic hurdles. Friends also stepped in as tutors and as motivational

supporters. Employers provided participants financial support and academic coaching in ways that supported their educational goals and completion of the HRCs.

Personal Stance

Motivation, commitment, independence, self-direction, and resourcefulness marked personal attributes that contributed to completion of their HRCs. These qualities formed the positive stance that framed their experience in a way that allowed them to not only survive the hurdles, but also excel in the course. Motivation was foundational to the stance of participants as they approached their HRCs. Personal goals, interest in the subject, and a passion for learning propelled participants to excel in their HRCs. Those who were committed to their HRCs placed the course high within other priorities in their life. They honored the demands of the class by making sacrifices and balancing competing demands of work, school, family, and friends. Independence aided participants as they navigated the HRC environment. Self-direction represented ways in which they approached their learning. They took control of their courses and their learning strategies. Participants referenced personal qualities such as self-awareness, self-discipline, and self-responsibility as contributors to their self-directed learning. Resourcefulness emerged as a personal quality that contributed to the positive stance of some participants. They were creative in their approach to solving problems and overcoming obstacles within their HRCs. As they exercised a positive stance marked by motivation, commitment, independence, self-direction, and resourcefulness participants were propelled to complete their HRCs.

Personal Investment

Personal investment illustrated how participants allocated the resources required for them to meet the demands of their HRCs. Their personal investment of extra time, effort, sacrifice, and focus paid off in the HRCs. Their ability to stay organized, manage their time, and remain in control of their course contributed to their success. Participants described how their approach to preparing, organizing, and managing their resources contributed positively to their HRC experience. Participants investing in these ways, realized the opportunities afforded by their HRCs.

Findings: Obstacles

Late Start

Participants who entered their HRCs after the start of the class found themselves at a disadvantage. They missed the planned orientation sessions and the chance to preview and get a head start in the class. Late enrollment of HRC participants left them feeling unprepared and behind as they started their course.

Surreal HRC Classroom

Participants were challenged to visualize their HRC classroom as real. They struggled to connect to an environment that lacked physical space and live people. They found their HRC sterile and barren. Some participants were unable to find a reality within the virtual HRC environment. The surreal HRC classroom became an obstacle they could not overcome.

Lack of Student-Instructor Interaction

Participants expressed a need to feel connected to their instructors. When their HRCs provided little or no opportunity to interact with their instructors, participants

experienced barriers to their learning. The barriers intensified when instructors were not involved in discussion boards, responded abruptly and cryptically to e-mail, or failed to reply to messages.

Void in Student-to-Student Connections

Participants found little or no opportunity to interact with other students in their HRC classrooms. The course designs provided few ways for students to get to know one another or learn collaboratively. The discussion boards were used in limited ways if used at all. The void in student-to-student interaction intensified the *Isolation* that participants felt within their HRCs. Some were unable to cope with this obstacle.

Lack of Convenient Support Services

A lack of convenient support services for HRC participants was an additional obstacle. While tutoring services were available on the college campus, participants found the support inconvenient. Participants were frustrated when they attempted to access academic support at the campus but found no one to assist them during the designated hours. They also expressed frustration in the requirement to complete the HRC exams on the college campus. Many enrolled in their HRC so they would not have to go to campus at a set time and place. Support services at the college did not complement the flexibility offered by online courses.

Unrealistic Expectations

Expectations of participants did not match the reality that they found. They enrolled in their HRCs expecting the academic content that was easy to understand. They were confident they had allotted the personal resources of time and effort required to master the material. Instead, they found unfamiliar, complex, and nonintuitive content

that advanced at a rapid pace. They were disoriented by the cumulative nature of the content. When they could not master the material in a timely manner, they fell behind. Surprised at the difficulty of the academic content and the amount of effort required to learn the material, participants were stunned by the demands of the class. Unrealistic expectations presented obstacles for some participants as they were unable to respond to the realities of the course.

Complex Academic Content

The academic content of the HRCs was complex. Many participants were unfamiliar with the material, and they were left searching for a context to understand it. The HRC content was absolute and nonintuitive in nature with no room for interpretation. The HRC content was cumulative. In order to advance in the course, participants needed to understand each lesson in sequence. When they missed a step or lagged behind, they had difficulty regaining their posture within the course. Some participants admitted feelings of discord with the academic content. Their lack of interest or confidence in learning the subject matter became an obstacle for them.

Course Configuration and Organization

The configuration and organization of the HRC courses presented obstacles for participants. The accelerated time frame of the summer semester posed particular hurdles when participants were unable to keep up with the advanced pace. Another problem was content sequence. When participants encountered extensive reading assignments without practical application, they had difficulty maintaining interest. Ambiguous assignments and unclear directions left participants floundering. Poor organization of some HRCs negatively impacted the learning experience of participants. HRCs condensed into a

shortened summer semester advanced rapidly. When participants were unable to keep up with the pace, they lost the grounding necessary to stay current with the course.

Technology Hurdles

Technology challenges surfaced throughout the HRCs. All of the participants had the basic computer literacy required to enroll in their HRCs. Even with this preparation, HRC participants experienced hurdles with technology. The nature and extent of the problems varied. Navigating the course management system presented challenges for some. Hardware and software compatibility were issues for others. Technology concerns that occurred early in the course left HRC participants feeling anxious, and their ability to keep pace with the course was threatened.

Lost Motivation, Lackluster Commitment

Some participants lost their motivation and commitment for their HRC when they lacked interest in the course, were without clear goals, or found the demands of the HRC more than they could bear. They were dissuaded by the lack of human interaction. Their motivation for the course was short lived, and they were unable to honor their commitment to the course.

Interdependence

Some participants were dependent on the support they were accustomed to receiving in synchronous campus classes. The set time for classes in a physical place, along with interaction with their instructor and other students, enabled them to progress in their campus classes. Those who had other online class experiences were comfortable with course designs that provided for a robust interactive experience that supported their

needs. When participants were faced with the HRC environment, some were unable to respond to the independence and self-direction required to progress.

Diminishing Returns

The choice of participants to enroll in the HRCs required an investment of money, time, and energy. A withdrawal from the course meant they would lose their financial investment and reap nothing for their time and effort. Participants carefully weighed their decision to withdraw from their HRC. When they saw diminishing returns, they gave up on the HRC, and withdrew from or failed the course.

Findings: Other Factors and Conditions

Possibility of a Different Experience

HRC participants were critical consumers of education. They recognized how the quality of their HRC experience was diminished by the lack of interaction with faculty and other students. They contrasted their HRC environment to other educational experiences, and they were able to articulate ways to enhance online education. They suggested purposeful course design with enhanced faculty and student interaction as a way to provide a more engaging online environment.

Social Shield

The HRCs provided an opportunity for some participants to ‘hide out’ in a class where they disliked the content or found it difficult to understand. Several participants expressed discord with the subject matter. They feared embarrassment in a live classroom setting because of their lack of confidence in the subject matter. They did not want to be presented with a question or a task that they could not address. The online environment of

the HRCs provided a place for participants to discreetly and quietly pursue their course without worry of the social embarrassment that might occur in a synchronous on campus classroom.

Completion of Low Interest Course Requirements

Participants who combined campus and online classes to complete their degree requirements expressed a preference to take high interest classes in person and low interest classes online. Some selected their HRC because it was a degree requirement of little or no interest to them. They believed the online environment allowed them the opportunity to complete the requirement in the most efficient manner. They reserved their limited time to take classes at the campus for courses of high interest where they could interact in person with instructors or other students.

Compromise

Compromise represents an element of *Acquiescence* experienced by participants who completed their HRCs but admitted they made concessions to survive the experience. They settled for an undesirable experience as a way to complete a requirement or apply credit to their transcript.

Loss

Participants who were not able to accomplish their stated purpose realized obstacles beyond their HRC experience. Those who withdrew or failed their HRCs experienced a financial loss. They were unable to recoup the cost of their tuition and fees, and in some cases, the cost of books. The experience cost them time toward goal completion. They also experienced loss in other ways. Loss was heard from those who felt they compromised their educational experience by enrolling in an HRC. Loss

permeated the voices of participants who withdrew from their HRCs. They struggled to complete their assignments and pass their tests, but in the end, they were defeated by their HRC. Their voices describe the agony of their experience. Their expressions of loss emerged in themes of defeat, shame, and resentment. Their hope of access was denied.

Resolve

Through adversity, participants who surrendered learned from their experience. They gained a better understanding of their preferred learning environment. They learned what courses they could and could not complete online. They realized what was required if they were to take another HRC or repeat their uncompleted course. The HRC experience provided them with a self-awareness that equipped them for future choices. As each explored their circumstances, they individually found resolution. Some vowed never to take the HRC in an online environment. Others believed that with an adjustment of priorities and work load they would be able to find success in the HRC.

Empowerment

Participants who conquered the academic hurdles were empowered by their HRC experience. They built confidence as they met the *Academic Challenge* of their HRCs which allowed them to explore other online educational opportunities as ways to complete their educational goals. This especially was empowering to participants whose only access to higher education was through online learning. Completion of the HRCs fulfilled the promise of access and empowered participants to meet their academic goals that would allow them to transform their lives. As participants developed the qualities necessary to survive and thrive in the HRC environment and invested their personal

resources, they were able to reap intrinsic benefits from their experience. The qualities described in the structure of *Ownership* of the HRCs led to empowerment for some participants.

Summary of Findings

As I listened to the voices of participants the opportunities and obstacles of their HRC experiences emerged. The opportunities were (a) flexibility of time and place, (b) flexibility in learning, (c) preparation, (d) background in the course and experience in subject matter, (e) course orientation, (f) skills in technology, (g) support for learner, (h) personal stance, and (i) personal investment. The obstacles that HRC participants faced also emerged through their voices. The obstacles were (a) late class starts, (b) perceiving the HRC classroom as surreal, (c) lack of student-instructor interaction, (d) void in student-to-student connections, (e) inconvenient support services, (f) unrealistic expectations, (g) complex academic content, (h) accelerated course configuration and poor course organization, (i) technology hurdles, (j) lost motivation and lack of cluster commitment, (k) interdependence on others, and (l) diminishing return on investment.

Outside of specific opportunities and obstacles expressed by participants, several other findings emerged from my study. Participants were aware that different online course experiences were possible through thoughtful course design. Some also admitted that the HRC provided a shield that protected them from social embarrassment when they were slow or unable to understand the course content. Others stated they enrolled in the HRC to complete low interest course requirements. The compromise, loss, resolve, and empowerment experienced by participants represented additional findings.

Part 1 Summary

As I reflect on my findings, I am compelled to answer the questions of what was validated and what changed from my original expectations. I address these questions in the narrative that follows through the opportunities, obstacles, and other findings of my study.

Opportunities

As I met the participants in my study, it was of no surprise that their purpose for enrolling was flexibility of time and place. I also expected the qualities of a positive personal stance to propel success in the HRCs. Likewise, I also expected that background in the course and experience in subject matter, course orientation, preparation, support for learner, personal investment, and skills in technology would serve as an advantage to participants. Of all the opportunities that emerged in my findings, I was most surprised to learn of the advantages that the flexibility in learning afforded participants. I underestimated the value of learning pace, working ahead in a course, and the ability to apply alternative learning styles within an online setting.

Obstacles

Unrealistic expectations, a late start in the class, complex academic content, accelerated course configuration, lack of organization, lack of convenient support services, technology hurdles, lost motivation, lackluster commitment, and diminishing return on investment were obstacles common to the experience community college students who I encountered. I was not surprised to see these issues surface. I was amazed to hear about participants' perception of the surreal HRC classroom, the lack of student-

instructor interaction, and the void in student-to-student connections. I also underestimated the interdependence on others required by some HRC participants.

Other Findings

I was surprised how forthright participants were to describe the positive and engaging experiences they had in other online classes. I was also surprised that some participants admitted that they entered the course as a social shield. I expected to hear that some participants enrolled in the HRC to complete low interest course requirements. The additional findings of compromise, loss, resolve, and empowerment were findings that surprised me. It was disheartening to hear of the compromise and loss experienced by participants. Such experiences contradict the promise of high quality community college education. The resolve and empowerment of participants affirmed my hope for the potential held by community college students.

The findings of my study represent the opportunities, obstacles, and other factors of the lived experience of community college students enrolled in high risk online courses. Next, I turn to the literature to discuss the relevance and implications of my study findings.

Part 2: Relevance to Literature

Introduction

My findings are illustrated through the structures of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* that form the phenomenon's essence, *Delicate Engagement*. This essence portrays the complex and delicate interplay of elements that define the lived experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs. The intricacy of factors that contributes to student attrition and retention appears throughout

the literature of distance education. Cookson (1989) wrote about this complexity in his seminal work that reviewed the early literature on distance education. He recognized there was no single factor to explain why students completed or dropped out of distance learning courses. Kember (1990) agreed with Cookson, and noted there was no single intervention to promote student completion or to mitigate student drop-out. Muilenburg and Berge (2001) conducted a comprehensive review of distance education literature for the period 1990-1999. They documented a myriad of issues that created barriers for distance education students. In a more recent review of literature, Dabbaggh and Bannan-Ritland (2005) recognized that many factors intertwine to impact student satisfaction and completion of online courses.

Cookson's (1989) early writings suggested qualitative studies that allowed for the interplay of multiple factors as a way to better understand the student experience. I chose phenomenology as my qualitative method to gain a holistic understanding of the multiple dimensions at play in the student experience. It was my aim to identify aspects that contributed to course completion and factors that led to course drop-out or failure.

As I compared my findings to the literature, four areas surfaced as relevant. The first addressed purpose, why students enroll in online classes. The second body of literature related to my findings was adult learning theory. The work on attrition and retention theory represented a third area of relevance to my findings. Finally, my findings had similarities to the literature on barriers to distance learning. Following is a discussion that relates my findings to: (a) community college online learners, (b) adult learning theory, (c) attrition and retention theory, and (d) research on barriers to distance learning.

Community College Online Learners

Dabbaggh and Bannan-Ritland (2005) distinguished today's online learner and the distance learner of yesterday. They described the classic distance learner as an adult who is independent, place-bound, self-motivated, disciplined, a self-starter, and goal oriented. They asserted that the contemporary online learner is an emergent student who is adept at social negotiation and collaborative learning. Seehusen (2000) added to this understanding by informing us that within today's online classes, there is the classic time and place bound distance learning student, as well as a new generation of students who simply prefer this delivery mode of higher education. Online courses allow these students the opportunity to enroll in additional program requirements without concern for time conflicts with other classes or work schedules. These students make up many of today's community college online learners. The findings of Dabbaggh and Bannan-Ritland, along with those of Seehusen were supported by the HRC participants' purpose for enrolling in their HRCs.

The four courses selected for my study were offered by SCC both online and synchronously at the campus. The HRC participants chose online delivery because of the flexible format. The flexibility of time and place provided by the HRCs was the primary reason participants enrolled in the online delivery. For some, the flexibility of time and place offered them their only avenue to continue their education. The flexibility of time and place offered others the chance to accelerate their degree, the ability to remain geographically mobile, or the convenience to take classes around work or family obligations. Many also discussed their preference in this delivery mode provided by flexibility in learning. Finally, in addition to the flexibility offered by the HRCs, some

participants chose the course because it was a degree requirement of lesser interest to them, and the online format offered a convenient way to complete a program requirement. This finding was also supported by Harbeck (2001).

Adult Learning Theory

My participants mirrored the demographics of the adult learning population that distance learning serves (Carlson, 2004; Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). All participants indicated they were over the age of 21 at the time of data collection. Ten participants indicated they were over the age of 24 during their HRC enrollment. Three participants were between the ages of 20 and 23 during their HRC enrollment. Elements of the three prongs of adult learning theory, (a) andragogy, (b) self-directed learning, and (c) transformational learning described by Merriam (1993) were consistent with my findings. Merriam identified three major areas of study that distinguish adults from pre-adult learners. The first is the study of andragogy, a concept that provides a set of guidelines to design adult learning. A second area is self-directed learning, where learning occurs primarily through the initiatives of the learner. Self-directed learning provides philosophical grounding for andragogy (Pratt, 1993). Self-directed learning focuses on the process of how learning takes place. The third area of study that describes learning in adulthood is transformational learning. This facet of adult learning focuses on the change that takes place for the learner. Following is a discussion of how my findings relate to these three areas.

Andragogy

My finding are consistent with the concept of andragogy, which Malcolm Knowles (1980) introduced as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 43). In the

development of this construct, Knowles compared andragogy with pedagogy, the methods that help children learn. Knowles represented pedagogy and andragogy as a continuum of teacher directed and student self-directed learning. Knowles recognized that depending on the situation, both approaches to learning are appropriate for children and adults.

Pratt (1993) summarized the five assumptions of adult learning foundational to the concept of andragogy. These assumptions are (a) learner self-concept, (b) prior experience, (c) readiness to learn, (d) learning orientation, and (e) motivation to learn. From an andragogical perspective, the most important element of learning is the learner's experience within their world. Learners construct meaning and knowledge based on their self-concept and prior experience. The andragogical perspective also emphasizes that learning tends to be more subjective than objective. Therefore learners are ready, prepared, and motivated to learn when learning is important to their subjective position in the world.

My findings mirrored the pedagogical and andragogical continuum of teacher directed and student self-directed learning. The HRC participants placed along the continuum of teacher directed and student self-directed learning described by Knowles (1980). The instructional design of the HRCs required high levels of self-directed learning and reflected the concepts of andragogy. In my findings, I grouped participants into four categories, empowered survivors, compromised survivors, reluctant surrenderers, and misplaced surrenderers. The continuum begins with teacher directed learning. The misplaced surrenderers expressed preferences at the beginning of the continuum where learning is consistent with highly teacher directed pedagogical

methods. These participants were not able to navigate the independent learning required within the HRCs, and they were dissatisfied with their experience. They lacked the five assumptions of andragogy outlined by Pratt (1993) that included learner self concept, prior experience, readiness to learn, learning orientation, and motivation to learn. Next on the continuum were the reluctant surrenderers. Their independence and prior experience placed them a step away from pedagogical preferences, yet their readiness to learn, learning orientation, and motivation to learn was inconsistent with andragogy. Compromised survivors followed, exhibiting learning preferences more consistent with andragogy. They were least comfortable with the level of independence required of the HRCs, but they exercised adult learning strategies and were able to navigate the HRC environment. Empowered survivors mirrored learning preferences highly consistent with the five assumptions of andragogy. These participants had a strong learner self-concept, prior experience, readiness to learn, learning orientation, and motivation to learn.

As I reflected on the design of the HRCs, I saw a strong connection between the high risk nature of the classes and the five assumptions of andragogy described by Pratt (1993). The HRCs required participants to construct meaning and knowledge based on their self-concept and prior experience. The content of the HRCs was concrete, nonintuitive, and rules oriented. The HRCs offered no opportunity for interpretation. The design of these classes required HRC participants to learn from an andragogical perspective. The HRCs were only able to accommodate the learning needs of survivors. Participants who were able to complete their courses were able to integrate and apply the content of the HRCs in an independent manner. They made meaning of their learning by drawing on their self-confidence and experience within their world. They entered the

HRCs ready, prepared, and motivated to learn. Participants who surrendered to the HRCs were not able to relate the content to their place in the world. They were unready, underprepared, and lacked motivation to learn. They required a strong sense of direction from teachers and interaction with others to understand and integrate the material. The principles of andragogy aid in understanding the findings of my study. Self-directed learning is a core principle of andragogy. A discussion follows to relate my findings to self-directed learning.

Self-directed Learning

Self-directed learning places the individual at the center of learning, with a focus on self-development where learner needs are more important than content (Caffarella, 1993). Caffarella illustrated three guiding principles of self-directed learning. First, learning is a self-initiated process that emphasizes the ability of individuals to plan and manage their own learning. Second, self-directed learning is a personal attribute or characteristic of autonomous learners. Third, self-directed learning is a way of organizing instruction that allows for greater learner control. The role of educators in self-directed learning is one of a facilitator rather than a content expert.

Self-directed learning was at the heart of the structure of *Ownership*. The title of this structure defines the self-directed learner. A person with the qualities of *Ownership* is autonomous, one who is in control, and one who takes charge of their learning. Themes of motivation, commitment, independence, and resourcefulness emerged to define participants who demonstrated *Ownership*. Participants who exercised *Ownership* were able to sustain their learning within the HRCs despite the obstacles presented by the *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* of the experience. Self-directed learning was critical to

the survival of the HRC experience. Participants able to fully own their experience also were afforded the opportunity to experience transformation. A discussion of these points follows.

Transformational Learning

A third field of adult education prominent in the literature is transformational learning. Change is the essential element in transformational learning. Clark (1993) articulated that while all learning results in change, transformational learning implies more far reaching outcomes that shapes people “in ways both they and others can recognize” (p. 47). Clark summarized transformational learning as formal or informal that can occur either gradually or suddenly and is connected to the adult developmental process. The theme of individual empowerment within the structure of *Ownership* exemplifies Clark’s description of transformation.

As participants exercised the qualities of *Ownership*, they were able to reap intrinsic benefits from their experience. They expressed these benefits as individual empowerment. They spoke of the ways in which their ability to learn in the HRC environment was transformational. It changed their way of thinking of themselves and their world. The empowerment these participants gained through the HRC experience let them know they could complete their educational and career goals in a learning environment that provided them access to higher education.

I have illustrated how the three tenants of adult learning theory, andragogy, self directed learning, and transformational learning applied to my study. I turn next to the literature of attrition and retention theory to add further insights to my findings.

Attrition and Retention Theory

My study included both students who surrendered to their HRC experience and those survived. Theory on student attrition and retention has relevance to my findings. Summers (2003) noted theoretical models related to the study of community college student retention are found in the work of Bean and Metzner (1985), Spady (1970, 1971), and Tinto (1975). The work of Bean and Metzner, Spady, and Tinto addressed the broader perspective of why students drop-out from school. Kember (1989, 1995) refined these models to study drop-out of courses delivered at a distance. Houle (2004) contributed additional perspective to Kember's work for online community college students. A discussion follows to relate this body of literature to my findings.

Academic and social integration was the common theme among the work of Bean and Metzner (1985), Spady (1970, 1971), and Tinto (1975). Spady argued that for traditional students to persist in postsecondary education, social integration into the fabric of the institution was necessary. Tinto built on the work of Spady and asserted that a traditional student's decision to remain or depart from college was related to the degree of integration into the social and academic life within the college community. Tinto's model recognized that the cumulative effect over time of multiple variables that included student background, commitment to study, and interaction of both peers and faculty as major contributors of academic and social integration. Bean and Metzner (1985) recognized the need for a different theory to explain the departure process for nontraditional students. They contended that theoretical models of student attrition developed by Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975) were relevant to traditional aged residential students, but these models did not explain attrition of nontraditional adult

students who are unable to take advantage of the social aspects of the college setting. Bean and Metzner developed a model of student attrition that placed more emphasis on the interaction of both academic and environmental factors and assigned less importance to social integration. They contended that environmental influences such as positive family support, adequate finances, and appropriate childcare weighed heavier in the decision to stay in school than academic factors alone. Later work by Tinto (1987, 1993) expanded his original model with relevance to community college student departure which included the interaction of multiple aspects such as personal adjustment, academic difficulty, incongruence, feelings of isolation, finances, learning, and external obligations or commitments.

Kember (1989, 1995) integrated the models developed by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985) to consider not only students enrolled in college courses, but adult students taking courses at a distance. Kember (1990) noted, “Drop-out from distance education is a complex phenomenon influenced by a multitude of variables” (p. 11). He proposed that variables are interdependent, each influencing the other, with no single explanation for student drop-out. Kember’s model of drop-out from distance education incorporates student characteristics, goal commitment, academic environment and integration, social environment and integration, and cost benefits analysis to determine whether a student completes or drops out of a distance education courses.

The findings of my study are consistent with Kember’s (1989, 1990, 1995) model. Kember described drop-out from distance education courses as complex with many factors at play. Kember noted student characteristics, goal commitment, academic

environment and integration, social environment and integration, and cost benefits analysis were incorporated into the student's decision of whether to drop-out or persist in distance education courses. Houle (2004) found Kember's model a good fit to explain persistence of adult students in online associate's degree courses. Her application of Kember's model suggested that successful online students are those who take responsibility for their own progress. Unsuccessful students are those who are unwilling to make sacrifices or negotiate study time. My findings built on Houle's conclusions and offer detailed description to explain the complexity of factors at play in Kember's model. Through the structures of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence*, I described the intricate ways that many factors interface to form the essence of my study, *Delicate Engagement*.

My findings illustrated the complexity of student attrition and retention in high risk online courses as I described how the interplay of *Isolation*, *Academic Challenge*, *Ownership*, and *Acquiescence* led participants to experience their HRCs in four different ways: two described student retention, and two described student attrition. Empowered survivors and compromised survivors illustrated two different ways in which students persisted in their HRCs. Empowered survivors responded positively to both *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* with *Ownership*. These survivors described an enriched, self engaging, and satisfying experience. Compromised survivors responded negatively to *Isolation* through *Acquiescence*. They met *Academic Challenge* with positive qualities of *Ownership*. While these survivors met the demands of their HRC, they were disappointed in their experience and expressed regrets over the lack of engagement in their HRC. Reluctant surrenderers and misplaced surrenderers described participants who withdrew

from or failed their HRCs. The reluctant surrenderers responded positively to *Isolation* with qualities of *Ownership*, but they responded negatively to *Academic Challenge* through *Acquiescence*. They were satisfied with the HRC environment but were unprepared to make the investment necessary to survive the experience. They expressed interest in reenrolling in the HRC at a different time. Misplaced surrenderers responded negatively to both *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge* through *Acquiescence*. Unable to establish meaningful engagement and meet the academic demands of the HRC, they surrendered, disappointed and dissatisfied.

My findings support models of student attrition and retention that address the complex interplay of multiple aspects of the student experience. Kember's (1989, 1990, 1995) model of drop-out from distance education courses provides a foundational theoretical framework for future studies of community college students enrolled in HRCs.

Barriers to Distance Education Persistence

Throughout the history of distance education, a major focus of research surrounding attrition has been the barriers experienced by learners. The results of my study have direct relevance to the literature of barriers to distance education. Galusha (1997) concluded that by first identifying learner barriers, strategies can be developed to mitigate these circumstances. She noted that many of the barriers in distance education were common to all types of delivery modalities. She added that the research on learner barriers in distance education attempts to provide an understanding that allows for the interplay of multiple variables found in the student experience. My discussion on attrition and retention theory in the previous section supports the need to understand how multiple factors intermingle to better understand the student experience.

The literature on barriers to adult participation in higher education, distance education, and specifically courses and programs delivered through online learning provides a relevant context for my research findings (Cross, 1981; Garland, 1993a, 1993b; Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner, & Ison, 2002; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Schilke, 2001). Cross (1981) articulated the early principles of participation in adult education. Cross wrote “It is just as important to know why adults do not participate (in learning) as why they do” (p. 97). Cross identified three types of barriers to adult participation in learning. She noted these barriers have relevance to self-directed learning. The three categories of barriers are (a) situational, which arise from one’s life situation at the time; (b) institutional, originating from practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in educational activities; and (c) dispositional barriers, which are related to attitudes and self-perception.

Garland (1993a, 1993b) expanded on the barriers to adult participation in learning defined by Cross (1981) and constructed a framework of learner barriers in distance education. The situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers described by Cross provided a conceptual model to understand attrition and persistence in Garland’s study of adult learners in higher education. Garland applied this framework to her research and included epistemological barriers to further understand the student experience. Schilke (2001) extended this conceptual framework to include the technical barriers that are present for online community college students. A discussion follows to show how this body of literature relates to my research questions.

Garland (1993a, 1993b) categorized reasons for withdrawal into four areas of learner barriers. She labeled the barriers situational, institutional, dispositional, and

epistemological. In the distance education environment, situational barriers were described by Garland as those associated with a poor learning environment as well as lack of time to learn. This category included lack of family and peer support, over commitment of roles and responsibilities, and unclear expectations of the investment of time needed for course completion. Garland defined institutional barriers as those of cost, bureaucracy, availability of support services, and poor instructional design. Dispositional barriers reflected the psychological and sociological makeup of students such as unclear goals, procrastination, incompatible learning style, and lack of self-confidence. Garland described epistemological barriers as the gap between student preparedness and the instructor's expectations in the course. Epistemological barriers occurred when a student lacked the prerequisite knowledge, found the material too technical or theoretical, or lacked interest in the content presented. Studies conducted by Morgan and Tam (1999) and Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner, & Ison (2002) further supported the four categories of barriers to distance learning persistence outlined by Garland. Schilke (2001) also applied Garland's model to his study of community college adult online learners. Schilke added technological barriers as a fifth prong of Garland's conceptual framework.

As I examined the opportunities and obstacles identified in my study, it became apparent that my findings also fit the five categories of barriers described by Garland and Schilke. I examined both opportunities and obstacles in my study to generate an understanding of how students succeeded and how they surrendered in their HRC experience. As noted by Galusha (1997), by understanding the obstacles that learners face, strategies can be developed to mitigate these circumstances. My findings also provide an understanding of how students succeed, allowing additional perspective for

strategies to overcome the obstacles. To add to the conceptual framework of barriers outlined by Garland (1993a, 1993b) and Schilke (2001), and supported by Morgan and Tam (1999) and Moore et al. (2002), I have expanded the framework to include both obstacles and opportunities within each category. Following is a discussion of how the opportunities and obstacles represented in my findings relate to the situational, institutional, dispositional, epistemological, and technological barriers described in the literature.

Obstacles and Opportunities:

Situational, Institutional, Dispositional, Epistemological, and Technological

Situational Opportunities

The HRCs provided opportunities that afforded participants the flexibility of when, where, and how they learned. These opportunities were reflected in participants' purpose for enrolling in the HRCs. Family, friends, and employers provided additional opportunities for participants as they offered child care, tutorial, motivational, and financial support. These opportunities were described in the structure of *Isolation*. Finally, the ability of participants to invest in the course through their time, effort, and focus provided additional opportunities. These opportunities were represented in the structure of *Ownership*.

Situational Obstacles

Situational barriers were described by Garland, (1993a, 1993b) as those associated with a poor learning environment as well as lack of time to learn. This category included lack of family and peer support, over commitment of roles and responsibilities, and unclear expectations of the investment of time needed for course

completion. My findings identified situational obstacles similar to the barriers described by Garland. Lack of time to learn, over commitment of roles and responsibilities, unclear expectations of the investment of time and effort needed for course completion, the late start in the course, and the realization of diminishing returns emerged as obstacles within the structure of *Acquiescence*.

Institutional Opportunities

The course orientation offered by one of the HRCs was viewed as a valuable opportunity by participants. Those who attended these sessions appreciated the chance to see their instructor in person and to learn of the expectations of the course. Meeting the instructor and hearing about the course requirements allowed participants the chance to adjust their expectations and enter the course prepared. In addition, all of the HRCs provided technical orientation to the course management system. This orientation was offered as an online tutorial and through sessions at the campus. A second institutional opportunity was that all participants entered the HRCs with the appropriate prerequisites. Safeguards were in place at the institution to insure prerequisites were met.

Institutional Obstacles

Garland, (1993a, 1993b) described institutional barriers as cost, bureaucracy, availability of support services, and poor instructional design. Three areas of obstacles surfaced in my study. The first was poor instructional design. HRC participants experienced a surreal classroom where they had difficulty establishing real connections. The lack of student and instructor interaction along with the limited chance for students to connect with each other raised further obstacles within the HRCs. Participants found support services inconvenient and incompatible to the anytime, anywhere appeal of the

online environment. Finally, the provision for late registration placed some participants at a disadvantage. Participants registering late missed orientation sessions and struggled to keep pace with the course. Institutional obstacles were described through the structures of *Isolation* and *Academic Challenge*.

Dispositional Opportunities

The motivation, commitment, self-direction, independence and resourcefulness represented in the personal stance of some HRC participants reflected dispositional opportunities. These opportunities surfaced within the structure of *Ownership* and represented the personal attributes and strengths needed to survive the HRC experience.

Dispositional Obstacles

Garland, (1993a, 1993b) illustrated dispositional barriers as those that reflected the student's psychological and sociological makeup. Unclear goals, procrastination, incompatible learning style, and lack of self-confidence were representative of dispositional barriers. Dispositional obstacles that emerged in my findings were unrealistic expectations, lost motivation and commitment, and interdependence. These obstacles were represented in the structure of *Acquiescence* as participants surrendered to their HRC experience.

Epistemological Opportunities

HRC participants described epistemological opportunities as flexibility in the way they learned. They appreciated the ability to self-pace and spend more time on difficult concepts and less time on material that was easy to understand. They also found opportunity when they had some course background and experience in subject matter. Some participants had experiences in other online courses, and they were able to share

effective instructional techniques. Epistemological opportunities were seen through the purpose of participants and in the structure of *Academic Challenge*.

Epistemological Obstacles

Garland, (1993a, 1993b) explained the gap between student preparedness and the instructors' expectations in the course as epistemological barriers. This barrier was present when a student lacked the prerequisite knowledge, found the material too technical or theoretical, or lacked interest in the content presented. In my study, epistemological obstacles surfaced within the structure of *Academic Challenge*. Participants who surrendered to the HRC experience often found the academic content complex and presented at too rapid a pace. Some found the content presentation confusing and disorganized. A few admitted to enrolling in the HRC when they had little interest in the course, and some participants were in discord with the subject matter.

Technology Opportunities

All HRC participants entered their courses with basic computer literacy. Their technology skills allowed them to navigate the online environment with ease. Those who were resourceful in understanding and using a variety of web tools found themselves at an advantage in navigating the HRC environment and course requirements.

Technological Obstacles

Schilke (2001) added technology barriers to the framework of Garland, (1993a, 1993b) to describe a set of barriers unique to online learning. Schilke reported that a variety of hardware and software hurdles were barriers to learning. The findings of my study were consistent with those of Schilke. HRC participants with unresolved technical issues early in the course struggled to keep up with assignments. Some participants had

difficulty understanding the course management system. After some practice, they gained confidence, and it was not a lasting issue. Technology obstacles were described in the structure of *Academic Challenge*.

I have integrated the opportunities and obstacles identified in the findings of my study with the situational, institutional, dispositional, epistemological, and technological barriers described in the literature as a way to gain a holistic understanding the experience of community college students enrolled in online courses. Through an understanding of both opportunities and obstacles, strategies can be developed to mitigate the barriers and enhance the experience of online community college students. Next, I provide recommendations from my findings and suggestions for future research.

Part 3: Recommendations for Practice and Research

The integration of my findings with the literature in the previous section lends a chance to offer recommendations for practitioners and possibilities for future research. In this section, I first provide recommendations from my findings for administrators, faculty, and students. Next, I offer suggestions for further research generated from the findings of my study.

Recommendations for Practice

In my study, I examined the experience of HRC students who completed their courses and those who did not. By looking at both groups of students, I was able to gain a holistic understanding of the opportunities and obstacles within their experience. My findings mirrored the framework of barriers described by Garland, (1993a, 1993b) and Schilke (2001). I expanded this framework to describe situational, institutional, dispositional, epistemological, and technological opportunities and obstacles to provide a

holistic understanding of the experience of community college students enrolled in HRCs. The opportunities identified in my findings suggested ways to reduce the obstacles. The obstacles that emerged showed ways to enhance opportunities. The opportunities and obstacles described in my findings allowed me to develop recommendations for HRC students and community college practitioners. Following are 10 recommendations for practice:

1. Identify HRCs and develop targeted retention programs specific to this population of students.
2. Provide prospective students with information and orientation sessions that alert them to the course expectations and the personal investment of time, effort, and focus required to complete the HRC.
3. Require assessment and advising for HRC students prior to course enrollment to ensure they are equipped to succeed.
4. Promote the importance of external support systems to online learners.
5. Design registration practices to eliminate late starts in HRCs, and encourage students to get a head start in the courses.
6. Provide student services and academic support geared specifically for HRC learners and delivered in convenient formats for online learners.
7. Conduct systematic student satisfaction surveys of HRCs, and develop programs that focus on gaps.
8. Conduct interviews of HRC students to identify reasons for withdrawal or failure and to understand what is working for completers. Incorporate findings into the

instructional design, policies, procedures, and practices of HRCs to ensure student focus.

9. Require that HRC instructors participate in professional development that promotes best practices in instructional design and delivery of online courses.
10. Mentor HRC instructors on best practices, and monitor HRCs to insure an optimal online classroom environment.

The recommendations above are only some of the ways opportunities for online community college students can be maximized and obstacles can be minimized.

Continued assessment of courses and services can provide community college administrators and faculty additional strategies to enhance the student experience. Further research can also provide additional ways to improve student learning and success. My recommendations follow.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of my study demonstrated a need for additional research. Three recommendations follow:

1. There is a need for additional qualitative studies of the community college student experience in high risk online courses. Such studies could add to the existing research of opportunities and obstacles experienced by these students.
2. Studies are needed to identify categories of community college high risk online classes that cross institutions. Such studies would allow further exploration of the obstacles and opportunities to reduce the risks of these courses.
3. Studies of teaching strategies in community college online courses with high and low completion rates are needed. Such studies could isolate both effective and

ineffective teaching strategies and suggest ways of engaging students in high risk online courses.

Part 4: Closing Reflections

The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles provided a forum for participants to share their perspectives of what worked for them in their HRCs and a chance for them to voice their ideas on what can be improved in HRCs. Their willingness to share their experience provides a valuable contribution to the future of community college online learning. The importance of these classes was heard through their voices as they shared why they enrolled. For some, the HRCs and other online classes were their only way to access higher education. For others, these classes afforded the chance to better manage their many obligations and responsibilities. The HRC participants demonstrated their potential when they survived these experiences and their strength of resolve when they surrendered. As I reflected on the experience of the HRC participants, my thoughts returned to my student Jane, who I described in my opening vignette. I began my study with the hope that I might identify ways to reduce the barriers experienced by Jane. The opportunities and obstacles that emerged through the voices of HRC participants offered me the chance to identify ways that might improve the quality of the online learning experience for future community college students.

Six years ago, I began my quest to better understand the community college student experience in distance education. My limited view of the student experience came from my position as a counselor to community college students enrolled in telecourses offered in the early 1990s and in online courses that emerged during the turn of the

century. In 2001, I entered the Community College Leadership program at Colorado State University as a distance education student. The distance program appealed to me because I wanted personal experience that would allow me to better understand community college students learning at a distance. I also chose the program for many of the same reasons that participants in my study chose their HRCs. The program afforded me access to continue my education through a delivery mode that allowed me to meet competing personal and professional obligations. The distance delivery offered geographic mobility. Several times throughout my program, I called into my classes or logged on to the course management system from a hotel room located at the site of a professional meeting or vacation destination. Regardless of my professional or personal obligations, the flexible delivery allowed me to meet my classes and my assignments. The program was accessible and convenient. The delivery design worked for me.

Throughout the course of my study, I became aware that the delivery design was only one element of the effectiveness of my doctoral program. As I listened to the voices of HRC participants, I reflected on my own experience. There were many moments during my program where I felt the fragility experienced by HRC participants. With over 1500 miles separating me from my instructors, there were many opportunities for me to feel the *Isolation* experienced by HRC participants. As the findings of my study emerged, I realized that my experience could have been a *Delicate Engagement*. I was fortunate to have responsive, caring faculty and supportive classmates. The two helped me to stay engaged for the past six years. I am grateful to the CSU faculty and my classmates. It is my hope that the findings of my study will raise the awareness and result in improvements for the *Delicate Engagement* that exists in community college HRCs.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

ELECTRONIC LETTER TO SCC ADMINISTRATION REQUESTING ACCESS

Dear (SCC Chief Academic Officer),

Thank you for allowing me to conduct my dissertation research at your site and for agreeing to assist me in gaining access to potential participants. As a reminder of my background, I am a doctoral candidate in the Community College Leadership Program at Colorado State University located in Fort Collins, Colorado. The name of my study is "The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles." I would like to begin my study in the next few weeks. As requested in our April 25, 2005 phone conversation, I am enclosing the approval letter from Colorado State University Human Subjects Review Board for my study as well as a copy of my approved research proposal.

My research will involve interviews with students who are enrolled in courses with high drop out, withdrawal, and failure rates. I define these courses as high risk. I have carefully studied your institutions "Profile of Distance Learning at SCC, 2003-2004." With the help of your Director of Institutional Research, I have identified Principles of Accounting I, Precalculus, Statistics and Basic Computer Literacy as high risk online courses.

In order to gain access to these courses and students, I will need your assistance. Attached is a letter of invitation and explanation of my study for all faculty teaching online sections of these four courses. I would appreciate your assistance in connecting me with these faculty members. For those instructors who agree to participate, I will provide a note of invitation for students to be posted on the announcement section of the course web page and distributed to students through the courseware e-mail system. Please have interested faculty contact me by (date) in order to prepare for participant recruitment.

I am most grateful for your assistance with my dissertation research. If you have any questions, please call me at (phone number) or e-mail me at cbambara@address.net.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Bambara
Doctoral Candidate, Colorado State University

APPENDIX B

E-MAIL TO SCC FACULTY REQUESTING COOPERATION

Instructor Name
Address

Dear (Name of Instructor),

I am a doctoral candidate in the Community College Leadership Program at Colorado State University (CSU) located in Fort Collins, Colorado. My research will involve interviews with students who are enrolled in online courses with historically high rates of drop out, withdrawal, and failure as identified in institutional reports. The name of my study is "The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles." It is my hope that through a qualitative phenomenological study, I will be able to contribute to a better understanding of the online experience of community college students. My study will include community college students enrolled in select online courses in accounting, mathematics, and basic computer skills. Dr. Clifford P. Harbour, Associate Professor of Education at CSU, is serving as my dissertation advisor and principal investigator of my study.

I need your assistance in obtaining student volunteers for my study. I have attached an invitation letter to students explaining the purpose of my study and the student's role and requirements for participation. I am asking for your assistance in two ways. First, please place the attached invitation on the announcement page of your course software. Second, please distribute this note to students enrolled in your class through the e-mail distribution system in your course management system. In this announcement, students will be asked to respond confidentially to me through e-mail to let me know of their interest in participating in my study. I will then follow-up to insure interested students meet the criterion for my study, to provide students with additional information about the study, and to obtain contact information to arrange student interviews. Students will be assured confidentiality and pseudonyms will be used to describe participants and the study site. Participation in my study is strictly voluntary.

I am most grateful for your assistance with my dissertation research. If you have any questions about my request, please call me at (phone number) or e-mail me at cbambara@address.net. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Meldrem, CSU Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Bambara
Doctoral Candidate, Colorado State University

APPENDIX C

COURSE ANNOUNCEMENT AND E-MAIL TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Dear Student:

Cynthia Bambara, a doctoral candidate in the Community College Leadership Program at Colorado State University, has extended an invitation for you to participate in a research study. The study involves students who are enrolled in community college online courses in accounting, mathematics, and basic computer skills. The name of her study is "The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles." In order to conduct her study, she needs students like you to participate in a confidential interview. The total time required for your participation will be approximately two hours. Please know there is no obligation for you to participate and in no way will your participation or non-participation effect your enrollment in this class.

Through this study, Ms. Bambara hopes to gain a better understanding of the online experience of community college students. If you are a degree seeking community college student enrolled in an accounting, math, or basic computer skills online course, please consider participating in this study. To volunteer, simply reply to Ms. Bambara through her e-mail address at cbambara@address.net and she will respond to you with further details about the study. If you would like to speak with Ms. Bambara before you volunteer, she can be reached by phone at (phone number).

Sincerely,

Course instructor

APPENDIX D

FOLLOW-UP E-MAIL MESSAGE TO INTERESTED VOLUNTEERS

Dear Student,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my dissertation study titled “The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles.” So that you can learn more about my study, I have attached a copy of the informed consent form that each participant will be required to sign before they become a part of my study. This form provides details about my study and the expectations of those who decide to participate. Basically, I will be asking participants to tell me about their experience as a community college student enrolled in an online course in accounting, precalculus, statistics, or basic computer skills. I will be asking participants of my study to spend 60 to 90 minutes in an interview with me at the SCC campus or nearby meeting place and an additional 15 to 30 minutes for follow-up questions by telephone or e-mail. This second interview for follow-up questions will occur within three weeks of the first interview. I will follow-up with an e-mail to verify the accuracy of the interview transcripts and invite you to provide any final thoughts.

To participate in my study, you need to be a community college student seeking a degree and enrolled in an online course in accounting, precalculus, statistics, or basic computer literacy. If you meet these criteria, I hope you will consider volunteering for my study. After you have had a chance to review the consent form and decide that you would like to participate in my study, please reply to me by e-mail with the following statement:

“I am a community college student seeking a degree at (name of the community college) and I am enrolled in an online course in (provide the name of the course or courses).”

Also, please send me your name, e-mail address, and telephone numbers where I can reach you so that I may be in touch with you to arrange a time for an interview. Please note, if you are under the age of 18, you will need the signed consent of your parent or legal guardian in order to participate. Should you have any questions about my study or your role as a participant, I can be reached by phone at (phone number) or e-mail at cbambara@address.net .

Sincerely,

Cynthia Bambara, Ph. D. Candidate
Community College Leadership Program, Colorado State University

Attachment: Informed Consent Form

APPENDIX E

CONSENT FOR SCC STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

TITLE OF STUDY: “The Lived Experiences of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles”

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Clifford P. Harbour

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Cynthia S. Bambara, Doctoral Candidate

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You have been invited to participate in this research because you are studying for a degree at a community college and you are enrolled in an online course in accounting, precalculus, statistics, or basic computer literacy. Many students find these courses challenging in an online class environment and I have referred to them as “high risk.” My study involves research to better understand the experiences of community college students enrolled in high risk online courses in accounting, precalculus, statistics, and basic computer literacy.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University who is conducting this study to complete the requirements for a degree program.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

I am conducting the study to better understand the student experience in online courses in accounting, precalculus, statistics, and basic computer literacy. Many students find these courses challenging in an online class environment and I have referred to them as “high risk” online courses.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The study will take place at Southern Community College in a conference room or nearby meeting place and will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes for each participant interview. The interview will be tape recorded, I will transcribe the interview tapes and provide you with a written copy within two weeks. I will schedule a second interview by e-mail or telephone within three weeks to confirm the accuracy of the interview transcript and to allow for follow-up questions that either of us may have. This follow-up interview will take approximately 15 to 30 minutes. I will record and transcribe the follow-up interview and send the transcripts to you. I will follow-up with an e-mail to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and invite you to provide any final thoughts.

Page__ of__ Participant’s initials _____ Date _____

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

You will be asked to describe in detail your experiences as a community college student enrolled in online courses. I will ask you a series of open ended questions to assist you in telling me about what and how you have experienced your online course(s).

ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You should not take part in the study if you are not a student enrolled in a degree program at a community college.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks. The only known potential risks are a) you may be embarrassed by disclosing information that may adversely reflect on you, your institution, or one of its employees and b) breach of confidentiality. Private, confidential interviews and pseudonyms will help minimize this risk.

If a breach of confidentiality occurs, the specifics of the breach will be immediately recorded and analyzed and a response designed with the primary objective of protecting the participant will be implemented. The principal investigator will also complete and transmit the HRC Human Subjects Reportable Event Report to the Human Research Committee, 321 General Services Building, Campus 2011 within 24 hours.

WILL I BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. The anticipated benefit of the research is that through presentation or publication of research results, community colleges, community college practitioners, and their constituencies may learn about the lived experience of community college students enrolled in high risk online courses. This understanding may help community colleges, community college practitioners, and their constituencies improve advocacy for groups and interests not traditionally included in discussion about community college students enrolled in high risk online courses.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time.

WHAT WILL IT COST ME TO PARTICIPATE?

There is no monetary cost associated with your participation in this study. You will be asked to spend 60 to 90 minutes of your time to participate in a first interview as well as 15 to 30 minutes of time in a second interview for follow-up questions. I will schedule a second interview for these follow-up questions (by e-mail or telephone) within three weeks of the first interview. I will follow-up with an e-mail to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and invite you to provide any final thoughts.

Page__ of__ Participant's initials _____ Date _____

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?

We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law. Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from your research records and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key. You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court.

CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?

If you fail to show up to your interview session or do not respond to follow-up questions, you may be removed from the study.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I AM INJURED BECAUSE OF THE RESEARCH?

The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact me, Cynthia Bambara at (phone number) or e-mail cbambara@address.net.

If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Meldrem, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

Page__ of__ Participant's initials _____ Date _____

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW? If you are under the age of 18, you are required to have your parent provide consent for you to participate in this study.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing ____ pages.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study _____ Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of person providing information to participant _____ Date

Signature of Research Staff

Obtain your parent's permission ONLY if you are under 18 years of age.

PARENTAL SIGNATURE FOR MINOR

As parent or guardian I authorize _____ (print name) to become a participant for the described research. The nature and general purpose of the project have been satisfactorily explained to me by _____ and I am satisfied that proper precautions will be observed.

Minor's date of birth

Parent/Guardian name (printed)

Parent/Guardian signature

Date

Page ____ of ____ Participant's initials _____ Date

APPENDIX F

COVER LETTER TO SCC FACULTY, ADMINISTRATORS, COUNSELORS, AND
ADVISORS

Dear (Insert Name),

I am a doctoral candidate in the Community College Leadership Program at Colorado State University (CSU) located in Fort Collins, Colorado. My research will involve interviews with students who are enrolled in online courses with historically high rates of drop out, withdrawal, and failure as identified in institutional reports. The name of my study is "The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles." It is my hope that through a qualitative phenomenological study, I will be able to contribute to a better understanding of the online experience of community college students. My study will include community college students enrolled in select online courses in accounting, mathematics, and basic computer skills. Dr. Clifford P. Harbour, Associate Professor of Education at CSU, is serving as my dissertation advisor and principal investigator of my study.

I need your assistance in obtaining student volunteers for my study. I have attached/ enclosed an invitation letter to students explaining the purpose of my study and the student's role and requirements for participation. I am asking for your assistance to distribute this invitation to students who have had experience with online courses in Principles of Accounting I (ACC 211), Precalculus (MTH163), Statistics (MTH 240) or Basic Computer Skills (ITE 115). I am interested in talking to all students with experience in these courses, including those who withdrew or otherwise did not complete the course. This invitation asks students to respond confidentially to me through e-mail to let me know of their interest in participating in my study. I will then follow-up to insure interested students who meet the criterion for my study, to provide students with additional information about the study, and to obtain contact information to arrange student interviews. Students will be assured confidentiality and pseudonyms will be used to describe participants and the study site. Participation in my study is strictly voluntary.

I am most grateful for your assistance with my dissertation research. If you have any questions about my request, please call me at (phone number) or e-mail me at cbambara@address.net. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Meldrem, CSU Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Bambara
Doctoral Candidate, Colorado State University

APPENDIX G

PRINT INVITATION FOR DISTRIBUTION TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Invitation to Participate in Community College Research Study
To participate in the Community College Research Study
“The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High
Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles”

contact:

Cynthia Bambara
Doctoral Candidate, Colorado State University
E-mail: cbambara@address.net
Phone: (phone number)

My name is Cynthia Bambara, and I am doctoral candidate in the Community College Leadership Program at Colorado State University. I invite you to participate in my research study, “The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles.” The study involves students who have experienced community college online courses in Principles of Accounting I (ACC 211), Precalculus (MTH163), Statistics (MTH 240) or Basic Computer Skills (ITE 115). I am interested in talking to all students with experience in these courses, including those who withdrew or otherwise did not complete the course.

Eligible student volunteers will be asked to participate in a confidential interview. The total time required for participation will be approximately two hours. There is no obligation to participate and in no way will participation or non-participation effect your enrollment in this class or at SCC.

Through this study, I hope to gain a better understanding of the online experience of community college students. If you are a degree seeking community college student with experience in an online course Principles of Accounting I (ACC 211), Precalculus (MTH163), Statistics (MTH 240) or Basic Computer Skills (ITE 115), please consider participating in my study. To volunteer, simply reply to me through my e-mail address at cbambara@address.net, and I will respond to you with further details about the study. If you would like to speak with me before you volunteer, I can be reached by phone at (phone number).

APPENDIX H
E-MAIL INVITATION FOR DISTRIBUTION TO SCC STUDENTS

Subject Line: Invitation to Participate in Southern Community College Research Study

Dear (name of student)

My name is Cynthia Bambara. I am doctoral candidate in the Community College Leadership Program at Colorado State University conducting a research study at Southern Community College (SCC). The College provided your name and e-mail address to me as someone who may be eligible to participate in my research.

My study, "The Lived Experience of Community College Students Enrolled in High Risk Online Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles" involves students who have experienced community college online courses in Principles of Accounting I (ACC 211), Precalculus (MTH163), Statistics (MTH 240) or Basic Computer Skills (ITE 115). I am interested in hearing from all students with experience in these courses, including those who withdrew or otherwise did not complete the course.

Eligible student volunteers will be asked to participate in a confidential interview that will last between 60 and 90 minutes. I will schedule the interview at a time and place most convenient to your schedule. The total time required for participation, including telephone or e-mail follow-up will be approximately two hours. There is no obligation to participate, and in no way will participation or non-participation effect your enrollment at SCC.

My study provides you an opportunity to offer your perspective and contribute to a better understanding of the online experience of community college students. If you are a degree seeking community college student with online course experience in Principles of Accounting I (ACC 211), Precalculus (MTH163), Statistics (MTH 240) or Basic Computer Skills (ITE 115), please consider participating in my study.

To volunteer, simply reply to me through e-mail at cbambara@address.net letting me know of your interest to participate in my study. I will answer any questions that you may have and respond to you with further details about the study. If you would like to speak with me before you volunteer, I can be reached by phone at (phone number).

Thank you very much for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Cynthia Bambara
E-mail: cbambara@address.net
Phone: (phone number)

APPENDIX I
FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Face-to-Face Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about yourself to help me get to know you better.
2. Please tell me about your educational experience at the community college.
3. Please tell me about your experience as a community college student enrolled in an online class in accounting, math, or basic computer skills.
4. What has the experience meant for you?
5. How did the experience affect you?
6. What changes do you associate with the experience?
7. What opportunities has the experience provided for you?
8. What obstacles has the experience presented for you?
9. What dimensions, incidents, and people intimately connected with the experience stand out for you?
10. How did this experience affect significant others in your life?
11. What feelings were generated by the experience?
12. What thoughts stood out about your online course experience?
13. What other factors or conditions contributed to your online course experience?
14. Is there anything else that you would like to share that is significant in your online course experience?