

**Factors that Successful and Unsuccessful Community College Students Perceive as
Fostering and Hindering their Success in Online Learning**

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine perceptions of community college students at a rural community college in Southeast Alabama, to identify the barriers they faced in being successful, and the strategies they recommended to improve the online learning program. The study also examined the extent to which differences existed between successful students and unsuccessful students regarding the barriers they faced in online learning. The overall population for this study consisted of 491 community college students who were enrolled in community college's distance learning and traditional classroom programs during any of the academic terms of calendar year 2012–2014. The population consisted of two groups of students: those who were successful in online and regular classes and those who were successful in regular classes, but unsuccessful in online classes. The case study, conducted at a community college in Alabama, used a mixed methods design to gather quantitative and qualitative data.

It was concluded that, overall, distance learning students experienced a high level of student satisfaction in regards to online courses. Four themes emerged from the analysis and were identified as Instructional Strategies, Interaction and Communication, Personal Issues and Technology. Categories within these themes were also identified. This study found differences between the general population of online students and unsuccessful students.

Implications and recommendations addressed an organized orientation program, expanded quality control and professional development initiatives. Recommendations for future research were also offered.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
List of Tables	x
List of Figures.....	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Purpose and Context of the Study.....	4
Significance of the Study	5
Conceptual Framework.....	6
Context and Problem Statement.....	9
Enrollment Trends	10
Methods.....	12
Assumptions.....	14
Limitations of the Study.....	14
Definition of Terms and Concepts	15
Organization of the Study	16
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	17
Distance Learning at Community Colleges	18
Distance Learning Student Success and Retention.....	21
Planning and Organizing for Online Instruction.....	23

Course Design.....	23
Class Procedures and Expectations.....	25
Technical Issues	26
Hyperlinks and Navigation	26
Content Delivery.....	27
Instructor and Peer Interaction.....	28
Faculty Role	29
Role of Learning Management System.....	30
Online Orientation Program.....	31
Student Factors and Retention Rates	33
Summary.....	36
Chapter 3: Methods.....	37
Purpose of the Study.....	37
Significance of the Study	38
Research Methods.....	39
Population and Sample	39
Context of the Study	40
The Community	40
The School	41
Data Collection	44
Data Collection Approaches and Research Questions.....	44
Data Collection Instruments and Procedures	46
Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey.....	46

Discussion Boards.....	47
Interviews.....	48
Confidentiality	50
Data Collection and Analysis.....	51
Role of the Researcher	53
Unique Contribution	54
Validation Strategies.....	57
Ethical Considerations	57
Limitations	57
Summary.....	58
Chapter 4: Findings.....	59
Introduction.....	59
Population and Background.....	59
Research Questions.....	60
Results.....	60
Students’ Perceptions of the Quality and Value of Their Online Education Courses.....	60
Personal Issues (Personal Learning Style).....	61
Instructional Strategies.....	61
Interaction and Communication.....	62
Students Perceived Barriers to Success	64
Instructional Strategies.....	65
Delivery.....	65

Organization.....	66
Personal Issues	67
Learning or Personal Style.....	68
Lifestyle Issues.....	69
Interaction and Communication.....	69
Personal.....	69
Inadequate Instructional Feedback	70
Unsuccessful Students’ Perceived Barriers to Success.....	71
Personal Issues	72
Personal Learning Style	72
Lifestyle	73
Instructional Strategies.....	74
Delivery.....	74
Organization.....	75
Technology	76
Student Issues.....	77
School Issue	77
Strategies for Improving Online Instruction.....	78
Instructor Training	79
Student Support.....	81
Differences between General Population and Unsuccessful Students.....	82
Demographic Differences	84
Summary.....	87

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions	89
Purpose of the Study	89
Discussion of Key Findings	90
Primary Reasons for a Lack of Success for All Students	90
Instructional Strategies.....	91
Personal Issues	91
Interaction and Communication.....	92
Primary Recommendations for Improvement.....	92
Personal Issues	93
Instructional Strategies.....	95
Technology	97
Interaction and Communication	98
Comparisons between the General Population of Online Students and Unsuccessful Students' Perceptions.....	99
Personal Issues	99
Instructional Strategies.....	100
Interaction and Communication.....	101
Technology	101
Comparisons based on Demographic Differences	102
Personal Issues	102
Instructional Strategies.....	104
Technology	106
Interaction and Communication.....	107

Conceptual Framework.....	108
Demographic Differences	111
Recommendations for Future Research.....	112
Conclusion	113
References	115
Appendix 1 Interview Questions	126
Appendix 2 Informed Consent Letter	128
Appendix 3 Student Comments	131

List of Tables

Table 1	Academic Year Enrollment Trends	10
Table 2	Grade Distribution for Distance and Traditional Courses (Previous 3 Years)	11
Table 3	Retention Rates for Distance and Traditional Courses (Previous 3 Years)	12
Table 4	Demographics of Community College Students in U.S.	19
Table 5	Data Collection Instruments and Research Questions	45
Table 6	Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Item Frequencies and Combined Very Satisfied (VS) and Satisfied (S) Percentages	63
Table 7	General Population Student Perceptions of Barriers to Success.....	65
Table 8	Unsuccessful Student Perceptions of Barriers to Success	72
Table 9	Strategies for Improving Online Learning.....	79
Table 10	Comparison Table for Perceived Barriers to Success in Percentages.....	83
Table 11	Participant Age, Gender and Race	84
Table 12	Gender Responses by Percent.....	86
Table 13	Ethnicity Responses by Percent	86
Table 14	Age Responses by Percent	87

List of Figures

Figure 1. Factors Affecting Online Course Dropout	7
Figure 2. Factors Affecting Online Course Dropout	108
Figure 3. Modified Conceptual Framework for Barriers to Success in Online Learning	110
Figure 4. Modified Conceptual Framework for Barriers to Success in Online Learning Unsuccessful Online Students	110
Figure 5. Gender Differences	111
Figure 6. Age Differences	112

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Education has evolved from the days of a single teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. Today, a classroom is no longer confined to a physical space. Computers and online education have broken through school walls, giving students greater opportunities to personalize their education, access distant resources, receive extra help or more-challenging assignments, and engage in learning in new and unique ways (Wicks, 2010). Institutions of higher education have increasingly embraced online education, and the number of students enrolled in distance programs is rapidly rising in colleges and universities throughout the United States (Bonk, 2006). In response to an increased demand for more accessible educational opportunities, many states, institutions, and organizations have been working on strategic plans to implement online education in higher education (Levy, 2003). At the same time, misconceptions and myths related to the difficulty of teaching and learning online, technologies available to support online instruction, the support and compensation needed for high-quality instructors, and the needs of online students create challenges for such planning initiatives (Bonk & Kim, 2006).

Based on research related to elements that foster successful online learning, in recent years, online educators have found ways to enhance the online learning environment through rich content, using videos, collaboration, and conferencing features (Beldarrian, 2006). However, student retention has been noted as one of the greatest weaknesses of online education (Carr, 2000; O'Brien, 2002). Studies have shown that the failed retention rate for online college and university undergraduates ranges from 20 to 50% and that online course administrators believe

the failure and retention rates for online courses to be 10 to 20% higher than traditional classroom environments (Diaz, 2002; Frankola, 2001). Although non-completion of online courses continues to grow, the number of college students who are engaged in college classes and who are participating in online courses also continues to increase. Thus, while online learning has enhanced learning opportunities, there continue to be questions about how to assure that those who enroll in these programs are successful and/or remain in them through the completion of their courses or program

The development of the personal computer, Internet, and other technologies has allowed a much broader and diverse population of students to participate in postsecondary education, creating a new category of learner, who engages in online learning (Herbert, 2006). The online student possesses unique qualities. In the last few years online students could be identified primarily as working people who are trying to better their opportunities. This however is changing, as more and younger and older people become aware of the online model. This new category of learner has created a need for new ways to address the problem of retention (Halsne & Gatta, 2002). Research in student retention in online learning in higher education has been conducted for decades, but has primarily dealt within a traditional postsecondary setting of a university. Yet, the use of online learning has expanded rapidly in community colleges and their role in education has also expanded.

Community colleges have been asked to take a lead role in the resurgence of America by preparing students for jobs in the 21st century (21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 2012). Many of the students in these colleges include the new category of learners previously mentioned (Bureck, 2003). Currently, community colleges serve nearly half of the undergraduate students in the United States and are diverse institutions that support

a variety of students (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2012). Most of these students attend college to pursue an associate degree in order to transfer to a four-year college or university, to upgrade job skills for a targeted job, or to pursue a personal interest or hobby. A gateway to opportunity, community colleges are available to anyone who seeks a higher education and the promise of access is a critical value upon which the mission of community colleges is lived every day (McKinney, 2011). If community colleges do not deliver online courses in a manner that will foster student success, it could have grave consequences for these students, who may not have another opportunity to succeed in acquiring skills and/or a degree to help them succeed in life.

As community colleges heed the call to develop human potential, there is a growing pressure to increase student retention and program completion. The *National Commission of the Future of Higher Education* report in 2006 demanded public information about student performance including documentation of student learning outcomes that demonstrated the quality of the educational experience and provided proof of student success (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). There are also increased accountability requirements to document learning, create and share greater transparency of outcomes, and to provide evidence of program quality and student completion (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Brint, 2008; Murray & Orr, 2011). Seat time and enrollment growth, which were acceptable standards of quality in the past, are no longer sufficient. Instead, institutions of higher education are being asked to identify areas for improvement and build strategies to enhance student success.

Since online courses are expanding so rapidly, one way for colleges to improve student completion is to provide high quality online courses that foster their success. Any improvement in student retention and student performance within online courses will help

address the issues of accountability and completion, and ultimately, help supply the pipeline which provides for workforce needs within the United States.

Despite the growth in online learning in community colleges, and the expansion of enrollment in these colleges nationally, there is little research on the elements that enable students in these settings to succeed, the factors that hinder their success, or the benefits they receive from engaging in these programs. Most research found on this topic over the past 10 years has examined postsecondary four-year universities. A review of EBSCOhost to search Academic Search Premier and ERIC databases from 1999–2013 revealed only 41 articles using “online courses and community colleges” with parameters set to full text and peer reviewed. Another search of EBSCOhost using the same databases and parameters, but transposing the words community college and online learning revealed 36 articles. Thus, it is evident that research on this topic at the community college level is scant. This study sought to expand research on this important topic.

Purpose and Context of the Study

Since research on online learning for students who attend community colleges is limited, this study investigated the issue by evaluating perceptions of community college students at a rural community college in southeast Alabama. Students enrolled in four general education courses, all of which were offered in distance learning settings, constituted the sample and were representative of the population. The population consisted of two groups of students: those who were successful in online and regular classes and those who were successful in regular classes, but unsuccessful in online classes. The study presented the student views of issues that their perceived as preventing student success in online courses. It also focused on strategies for improvement. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are community college students overall perceptions of the quality and value of their online distance education courses?
2. What do community college students view as the primary barriers to their success in online learning?
3. What barriers do community college students who are unsuccessful in online learning perceive as being barriers to their success?
4. What do students recommend as strategies for improving online instruction?
5. In what ways, if any, do unsuccessful student perceptions of barriers to online learning differ from those of the general population of online students?
6. To what extent are student differences in these perceptions based on gender, age group, and ethnicity?

Significance of the Study

The ability to understand reasons for student's lack of success with online learning could greatly enhance the ability of community college administrators to make informed decisions relative to distance learning program improvements. The information should be valuable in arriving at improvements and modifications in course content and delivery methodology as well as in improving the overall online learning process. Distance learning student perceptions could provide valuable ideas to improving both the quality of the experiences and the retention rates of distance learners at community colleges.

The study should be of value to community college administrators and faculty who are developing and delivering online learning. It may also be of interest to community college students who are engaging in online programs. Finally, the study will add to the research base which examines online learning in community colleges and higher education, and may foster

additional research on this important topic. Results of this study may also provide the basis or incentive to conduct further studies into the relationship of student satisfaction in distance learning and traditional classrooms.

Conceptual Framework

A review of the literature conducted on online self-assessment practices concluded that a dropout decision is influenced by an array of factors with complex interactions among these factors. Some of these elements are externally controlled, while others are learner-oriented and may be controlled by the student.

Research findings from the literature combined with a review of two documents — the *Student Evaluation of Online Course* and *Interview Results* — at Southeast Community College three themes have emerged as common factors contributing to student dropout rates: psychological, technological, and social factors. The literature reviewed indicated that several factors impacted OLEs although each independent study considered only a limited number of factors at limited levels. Bekele (2008) has developed a more comprehensive model of this issue based on a review of 82 studies published in major educational technology journals between 1995 and 2006. The studies generally investigated impacts of modern learning technologies on student motivation, satisfaction, achievement, and critical thinking and problem-solving skills. According to Bekele's model (2008), success in the OLEs was a function of a complicated interplay of human, technologic, course, pedagogic, and leadership factors, abbreviated as HF, TF, CF, PF, and LF, respectively. Thus, overlooking one or more of these factors would unfavorably affect success measures such as learning outcomes, higher order learning (e.g., critical thinking, problem solving, and metacognition), student and faculty satisfaction, sustainability and scalability of online learning projects, and rate of return from investment on

such projects. The HF, TF, CF, and PF would impact success directly, whereas LP would affect it only indirectly by substantially impacting HF, TF, CF, and PF. Figure 1 provides a visual understanding of the model of success and success factors in Internet-supported learning environments (Bekele, 2008).

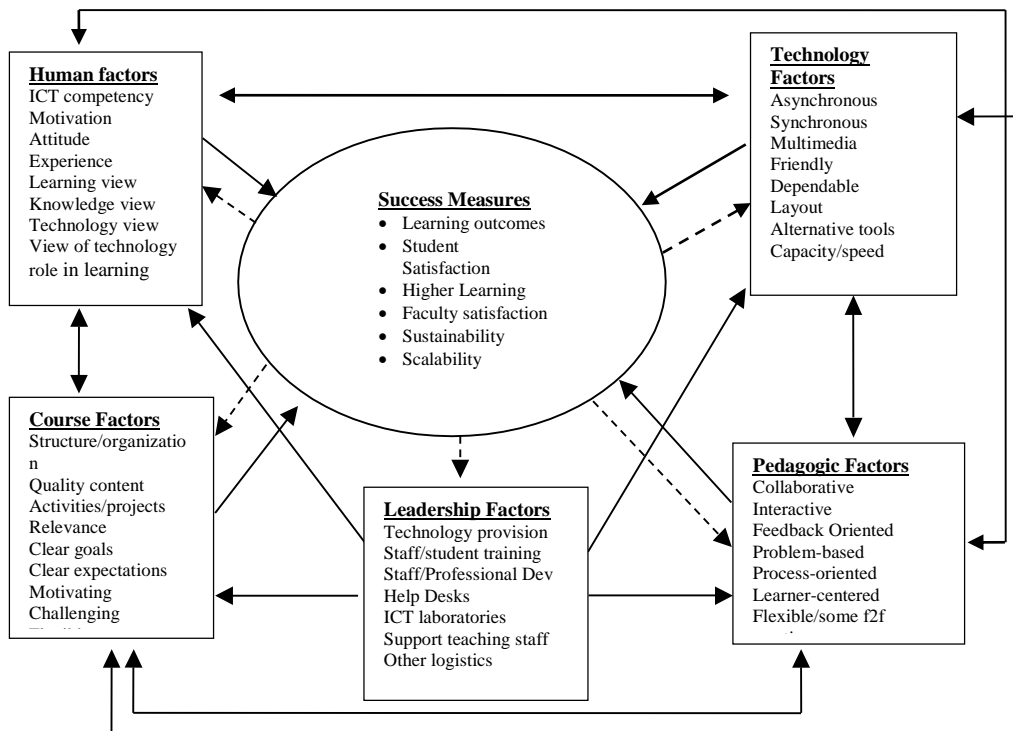


Figure 1. Factors Affecting Online Course Dropout

Human or personal factors that influence online course dropout involve the degree of the student’s feelings, perceptions, and reactions to the online learning courses and environment. It appears that feeling that one is part of a learning community may be an important element in student success. A learning community is defined as a group of students who have a sense of belonging; that is, they feel they matter to each other, possess shared expectations, and are committed to shared educational goals (Rovai, 2002). Interaction, participation, and social learning experiences are key factors in promoting connection and lessening isolation among

students (Outz, 286). These factors may be the most indirectly controlled factors that affect student retention. Self-efficacy, motivation, resourcefulness, persistence, and time management fall within this category.

More than 80% of community college student's work either full- or part-time, and 50% work full-time (Phillippe & Patton, 2000). Many students may have a variety of responsibilities in addition to working; they may be caring for children or other relatives. Due to these factors, students in online community college courses are forced to exhibit a high degree of self-discipline and self-direction. Research shows that psychological readiness may be the strongest influence on course dropout in community college learning environments (Liu, Gomez, Khan, & Yen, 2007).

Technological factors have been found to contribute to online course dropout. Due to advances in technology, students may be required to purchase additional computers, devices, software, and hardware before being able to participate in online courses. This may be viewed as an undue burden to many community college students. A recent survey conducted of more than 100,000 students at 245 community colleges revealed that 20% of students struggle with the cost of computers for education (Phillippe & Valiga, 2000). Therefore, many students may not have access to the technological tools needed to succeed in online learning.

Another major challenge community colleges face related to technology is that these students may not have the skills to use the required hardware and software to master the course content. One of the major challenges community colleges face is the ability to effectively serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged and older students who may register for online courses without possessing a basic level of computer literacy (Liu, Gomez, Khan, & Yen, 2007). Students need access and time to spend learning computer literacy skills and these appear to be

in short supply in some student situations, thus becoming barriers to their online learning success.

According to Liu, Gomez, Khan, and Yen (2007), institutional issues also affect online learners. Course factors, leadership factors, and pedagogic factors play a role in the success of online students. These factors are generally referred to as quality issues in designing and offering online courses. Clear expectations and structure were among the factors that impact success. Such factors include general design process and pedagogy as well as online collaboration and interaction.

According to these categories of studies, process-oriented and social learning was also vital for success. The level of administrative support available to students and instructors was also crucial. Administrative, technical support, logistics, and student and faculty support services also impacted success. The specific strategies contributing to success of the online student included helpdesks, support teaching staff, technical training, faculty professional development opportunities, and update of the technologic pool.

Context and Problem Statement

This study occurred at Southeast Community College, a small community college in Alabama that was established as a junior college in 1965 with a freshman class of 256 students. These students attended classes in rented rooms in the downtown area and in the educational building of the First Methodist Church. In the fall of 1966, the present campus, which contained two buildings at the time, was occupied. This campus has grown and now consists of seven modern buildings situated on a beautifully landscaped site. In 1983, the College began offering credit courses and non-credit short courses at an off-campus site. In February 2003, the Alabama State Board of Education approved the reorganization of the Junior College with a neighboring

Aviation Center. The college was renamed at this time. The college became designated as a “community” college rather than a “junior” college because technical training — aviation — was added to the academic mission. The mission of Southeast Community College, including the Alabama Aviation Center, is to serve students and communities by providing educational opportunities that enhance the quality of life and promote economic development.

At Southeast Community College, the faculty and staff strive to uphold the mission of the College, which is to serve students and communities by providing educational opportunities that enhance the quality of life and promote economic development. Southeast Community College, as well as many other rural community colleges in Alabama, helps prepare students for transfer, for immediate employment, and for career advancement. The College also offers assistance in formulating and achieving educational goals and improving learning skills while overcoming educational deficiencies. The enrollment of students in online courses at Southeast Community College is increasing and is expected to do so in the years ahead. Enrollment figures for the 2013–2014 academic year are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Academic Year Enrollment Trends

CIP Code	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013
Web	178	213	660	915

While the number of students enrolled in online learning has and is expected to continue to increase, the success rate of students in terms of grade distribution indicates lower levels of achievement. This grade distribution is presented in Table 2. As can be seen, there are large discrepancies between the percent of grades in the high ranges (A and B) between students in

online courses and those in traditional courses. Additionally there are much higher incidences of low grades (D and F) and withdrawals for distance students than for those in traditional classes.

Table 2

Grade Distribution for Distance and Traditional Courses (Previous 3 Years)

Grade Traditional Class	% Total	Grade Distance Class	% Total
Fall 2012			
A	38.5%	A	17.5%
B	24.5%	B	19%
C	14%	C	13%
D	3%	D	7%
F/WF	10.5%	F/WF	24.5%
W/WP	10%	W/WP	21%
Fall 2013			
A	39%	A	20%
B	26%	B	18%
C	14%	C	15%
D	3%	D	7%
F/WF	10%	F/WF	21%
W/WP	8%	W/WP	16%
Fall 2014			
A	41%	A	26%
B	26%	B	19%
C	13%	C	16%
D	3%	D	5%
F/WF	9%	F/WF	18%
W/WP	7%	W/WP	18%

The Table 3 shows retention rates for Distance and Traditional Courses at Southeast Community College over the last three years. As can be seen, there has been a steady increase in the number of students enrolled in Distance Education courses.

Table 3

Retention Rates for Distance and Traditional Courses (Previous 3 Years)

	2009–2010	2011–2012	2013–2014
Traditional	42%	51%	60%
Distance	20%	12%	10%

As the data reveal there are discrepancies between success between students who took courses online and those who took them using the traditional format. The study sought to determine student perceptions of why these differences exist and what may be done to improve online learning.

Methods

The researcher chose to approach this study using a mixed methods analysis. Triangulation of data through mixed methods serves to strengthen and offset any potential weaknesses of using either quantitative or qualitative approach. Quantitative scores on an instrument from many individuals can serve to offset the weaknesses of qualitative documents from fewer people and in-depth qualitative observations of a few people by providing detailed information about the context or setting in which individuals provide information when the quantitative data cannot (Creswell, 2002; Creswell & Clark, 2007). Quantitative methods allow for identification of previously unknown processes, explanations of why and how phenomena

occur, and the range of their effects (Pasick et al., 2009). The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the “human” side of an issue – that is, the often contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion. When used along with quantitative methods, qualitative research can help us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data (Bernard, 1995).

The overall population for this study consisted of 491 community college students who were enrolled in the community college’s distance learning and traditional classroom programs during any of the academic terms of calendar year 2013–2014. Four hundred students completed the Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey and constituted the sample for this study.

The quantitative portion of the study encompassed data that were collected and analyzed from a Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor survey of 491 students, conducted by Southeast Community College’s Department of Institutional Effectiveness. The calendar year 2013–2014 provided the timeframe for data collection, and data were compiled for each item and category of interest for that calendar year. The purpose of the survey was to gather data regarding distance learners’ perceptions of their level of satisfaction with their distance learning courses. The instrument permitted the acquisition of data in regards to course quality, delivery technology and administrative services; it also yielded information on the open comments and observations of distance learning students. Data analysis of the survey was conducted using

SPSS. Southeast Community College's Department of Institutional Research conducted this analysis and accessed data through archival files.

The qualitative aspect of the study consisted of three data sets: student comments on the quantitative Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor survey instrument, comments from a discussion board for students involved in online learning, and interviews of students who have failed an online learning class. Data analysis included content analysis and thematic analysis.

The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling. The overall criteria for sample consideration included: 1) a grade of less than C on an online learning course; (2) demographics: age, gender, and ethnicity; and 3) willingness to discuss positive or negative online experience with the researcher. In order to capture a representative sample of unsuccessful online students, eighteen students were considered for the study.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made in this study:

1. The sampled respondents of unsuccessful students were representative of all online learning and traditional classroom undergraduate students at Southeast Community College.
2. Students were honest in answering survey questions, providing information on the online discussion boards and participating in the interviews.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to the Southeast Community College general education student population. Any inference drawn from this study should be carefully examined according to the particular characteristics of the subjects used, the institutional environment, and the conditions

under which the study was conducted. Another limitation was that since not all students were interviewed, not all possible data that were available were gathered. Another limitation the researcher was not able to determine from the data if students who responded to the discussion board and to the survey were or were not successful.

Unsuccessful students may have responded to the survey, open ended questions, and discussion boards, meaning that some of their responses may have been included in the data used for question 2. However, since there were only 46 students in the unsuccessful group, their responses would probably not have had a significant impact on the findings. Since 91 students did not respond to the survey, it is also possible that the unsuccessful students were not part of the responding group.

Definition of Terms and Concepts

For the purpose of clarification, the following definitions of terms were used throughout the study.

Course Management System – a set of computer software tools designed to enable users to create Web-based courses.

Distance education – a generic, all-inclusive term used to refer to the physical separation of teacher and learners (Picciano, 2001).

Distance learning – a method of studying in which lectures are broadcast or classes are conducted by correspondence or over the Internet, without the student's needing to attend a school or college. Also called distance education.

E-Learning – electronic delivery of educational material and courses.

Online – describes products, services or information that can be purchased or accessed over the Internet.

Retention rate – the percentage of students at community colleges who continue their study through distance learning after completing at least three courses will be used in the calculation of retention rate.

Rural Community College – community colleges in low economic areas who play a critical role in providing access to higher education by delivering for-credit general education for transfer, improving the skill level of the existing workforce through non-credit courses, and creating regional economic advantage by building economically and culturally sustainable communities.

Traditional courses – courses in which the instructor and the learner are face-to-face in the same classroom.

Organization of the Study

This chapter introduced the problem statement and its design components. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature and related research. This is followed by Chapter 3 presenting the methodology and procedures used in data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents a summary of the results of the data analysis. The last chapter (Chapter 5) contains a summary and discussion of the findings of this study and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The “American Dream” has often been dreamed behind the walls of a prestigious college or university building. Though institutions of higher education have been recognized and associated with bricks, mortar, and ivy covered walls, the initiation of distance learning has slowly changed that perception. The phrase “From bricks to clicks” accurately describes the bricks or structure of the institution being replaced by the click of a computer mouse and the 21st century students who no longer attend lectures in traditional classrooms, but are at their computers geographically separated from the professor and communicating through the Internet (Pape, 2006).

This chapter presents a review of the literature of online learning as related to the research study. The literature review includes beings within distance learning at community college, distance learning student success and retention, and previous research documented a similar study at a community college.

In addition to this technological revolution in higher education, the adult student population is expected to be the fastest growing segment of higher education and, in fact, older students are projected eventually to constitute the majority of students in higher educational institutions (Kovel-Jarboe, 2000). Additionally this population will be increasingly ethnically and racially diverse.

Distance Learning at Community Colleges

Community colleges have emerged as a major provider of public higher education, enrolling nearly as many students in their programs as public four-year universities (Jacobs, 2012). Online learning is growing rapidly in community colleges. Students enroll at the local college for a variety of reasons. These reasons might include a desire for an occupational education, the need to develop fundamental skills necessary for entry into the workforce, or that they want some exposure to higher education, but do not yet have the maturity or commitment to enroll on a full-time basis at a four-year institution. This group of students is using community colleges to earn a general education that can transfer to a four-year institution. Some of these students may need some academic remediation to bring their qualifications up to a level necessary for admission into a certain institution or a four-year institution in general (Bettinger, 2009). For many community college students, success in this endeavor tends to be life changing. Table 4 indicates demographic information of students at community colleges in the U.S. as of 2013 (Southern Association of Colleges, 2013).

Table 4

Demographics of Community College Students in U.S.

Student Headcount	Total	Male		Female	
		#	%	#	%
Overall	2430	1445	59.47%	985	40.53%
Full Time	1427	892	62.51%	535	37.49%
Part-Time	1003	553	55.13%	450	44.87%
Asian/Pacific Islander	48	27	56.25%	21	43.75%
Black	549	307	55.92%	242	44.08%
Hispanic	66	38	57.58%	28	42.42%
White	1714	1047	61.09%	667	38.91%
American Indian/Native Alaskan	27	12	44.44%	15	55.56%
Ethnicity Unknown	26	14	53.85%	12	46.15%
21 years old & under	1277	762	59.67%	515	40.33%
22–29	550	343	62.36%	207	37.64%
30 & over	603	340	56.38%	263	43.62%

Community colleges fill a unique role in education in America. They offer students the ability to transition from high school to a four-year institution, receive a terminal degree for semi-professional and industry-specific training, and update skills needed in current positions. Due to the many roles of the community college, educators must examine the needs of a diverse group of students from many walks of life. Community colleges may often be an avenue to a

formal education that some people may not be able to attain without the help of the community college.

While creating a positive learning atmosphere for all students at the community college has always been a challenge within such a diverse setting, creating a positive online learning atmosphere presents additional challenges that must be addressed for community college students to be successful in online courses. The rural location of many community colleges presents a challenge for students who must drive many miles to a campus. Distance education offers a way to reach students dispersed over large geographical areas. Online courses offer a level of economic convenience for those institutions and their students. Online courses at rural community colleges offer the potential to maximize instructional resources and help ensure that students can attend classes without missing work and/or having to drive long distances. Online learning can be a viable option for many students. Many students choose online learning because of its convenience. At the community college level, students are often adult learners with a variety of responsibilities returning to school to obtain a degree. Working moms, advancing dads, and first generation college students make up the population at many rural community colleges (Cox, 2005). Community colleges serve as the primary source of post-secondary education for large segments of underserved student populations (Levin, 2007). These unique qualities of community colleges make it possible for online learning to flourish (Muse, 2003).

Although online learning appeared to be an appropriate strategy for rural community colleges, the research indicated that these colleges are challenged regarding the “digital divide.” As early as 2000, Sink and Jackson used the term “digital divide” to describe a technological gap in which urban community colleges typically enjoy better connectivity than rural institutions. As

used here, connectivity means the level of “quality and reliability of the connection for access to the Internet” (Adult Higher Education Alliance, 2008). To deal effectively with these issues, rural community colleges must commit to serious, deliberate planning for online courses.

Due to the nature of the community college and the students who attend these institutions, Berge (2013) suggested that certain factors must be addressed for successful online learning to occur at the community college level. Some of these factors included identifying the likelihood of student success and providing support to maximize this success, providing the necessary support for faculty making the transition to teaching online, and involving administration appropriately to streamline the transition to online learning.

Distance Learning Student Success and Retention

Many colleges, including community colleges, reported lower online retention rates in online courses versus their traditional counterparts. Various studies that have been conducted confirmed reasons for this trend (Fike & Fike, 2008). Although many institutions have lower online student retention rates when compared to on-campus retention rates, others do not. According to Tirado (2011), studies have shown five institutions with effective practices have achieved an 80% or greater online student retention rate. The effective practices ranged from activities to be completed before the students entered online courses as well as those services provided during online courses. Some common themes were course design, online faculty professional development, and online classroom management techniques. An institution interested in providing a better online learning experience for their students must consider all of these practices to ensure student success in online courses. Students who are not successful in online courses may be forced to drop out of their courses. They can get behind in their academic programs, become discouraged, collect unneeded debt, and ultimately leave the world of higher

education (Rath, Rock, & Laferriere, 2013). Thus, it is essential that community colleges address student's needs early to ensure they are not victims of neglect in their online courses.

The Sloan Consortium classified online learning as a course with 80 percent or more of its content delivered over the internet. An online course typically has no face-to-face meetings. Faculty at community colleges typically teach 3–5 courses a semester. These courses may be taught face-to-face course or online. Most of the time faculty at community colleges have a combination of face-to-face and online courses in their teaching load during the same semester. It is sometimes hard for faculty to shift their thinking from “conveyer of information” to “facilitator of information.” In the face-to-face environment instructors often play the role of mentor and “information presenter” (Roblyer & Wiencke, 2004). In contrast, the shift to the online environment requires the instructor to become an intermediary between students and content. The instructor in an online course may need to anticipate needs of the students in his/her course by providing instructions and setting boundaries and rules that may be common knowledge in the face-to-face classroom (Waltonen-Moore, Stuart, Newton, Oswald, & Varonis, 2006). Research indicates that it is essential for online instructors at the community college to provide interactive activities to ensure the adult learners in these courses understand the importance of preparing and being actively involved in the course. Instructors in online courses at community colleges are sometimes faced with the need to instruct students on how to be a successful online student as well as deliver content knowledge in a certain discipline (Summers, Waigandt, & Whittaker, 2005).

The greatest challenge of online learning at the community college can be matching the learner with the level of technology needed to access learning opportunities (McCombs & Vakili, 2005). Instructors who are successful online faculty engage their students by emailing them

frequently, responding to communication promptly, holding online office hours and study sessions, and providing students with a feeling of personal interaction. It is essential that rural community colleges plan for online course delivery by offering student's access to technology through their library or success lab.

Stewart and Strudler (2004) developed a measurement tool for assessing the effectiveness of online courses, noting there are seven dimensions that affect course quality: the course design, class procedures and expectations, technical issues, hyperlinks and navigation, content delivery, and instructor and peer interaction. In coordination with engaging students as active learners in online courses instructors must be prepared to invest more time in daily maintenance of the online course than they traditionally would invest in the campus-based setting.

Planning and Organizing for Online Instruction

There are many elements involved in planning and organizing for online instruction. Among these are course design, class procedures and expectations, technical issues, hyperlinks and navigation, content delivery, and instructor and peer interaction. These are described in detail in this section.

Course Design

Ray Steele, former president of the U.S. Distance Learning Association, was once asked if there were any subjects or disciplines that cannot be taught online. He replied, "There are probably some. But I think the right faculty member, sensitive to the audience needs, more than likely can find the right mix of technologies to teach almost anything through distance learning" (Sciuto, 2002). At the community college level, the instructional designer and the instructor are usually one in the same. Instructors must prepare their course environment for valuable learning to take place. Unfortunately, this often requires a skill set foreign to the instructor. Community college instructors are often industry employees with no background in education. Many

instructors may have never taken a classroom management course and integration of technology into the classroom course (Vonderwell, 2003)

Despite the appeal of community college online courses, there are many negative issues online community college courses face. Many community colleges are located in rural communities (Leist & Travis, 2010). These rural community colleges are characterized by their ability to work simultaneously to improve education and build the regional economy in these areas. There are three major resource challenges for rural community colleges: fiscal issues, a shortage of faculty and staff members, and digital divide concerns. The areas where rural community colleges are located often face high rates of unemployment and illiteracy. These rates can lead to low educational attainment levels. All of these characteristics can have a profound effect on the low allocation and tax rates. This lack of funds may have an adverse effect on expensive curricular programs, faculty salaries, and professional development. This lack of funding can result in a shortage of full-time faculty to develop and deliver quality online courses. Lucas and Murray (2007) noted that a rural faculty member often functions as the only instructor for a given discipline. For this reason, these faculty members are often reluctant to participate in any form of distance education (Schulz, 2012). This reluctance is often intensified by a lack of technology support staff that are essential to the development and delivery of online courses. Unfortunately, many rural community colleges lack this capacity because their support staffs wear too many hats.

Another barrier to online learning programs at rural community colleges that must overcome is the internet speed in the rural area. Due to a variety of factors, community college students may not have the means to purchase computers or be able to afford internet service in their homes. This inability to purchase technology needed to take an online course can hinder

the student's success in the course. The term used to describe this inability to acquire necessary technology is called a "digital divide" (Stewart & Strudler, 2004).

The design of online courses should be simple and intuitive. Designing simple and intuitive course experiences is more complex than it sounds. For example, popular learning management systems like Blackboard® can be used to create high quality course experiences as well as under-par and confusing ones (McClary, 2013). In other words, it would be like a carpenter who owns high quality tools but does not use them correctly and builds a faulty home. It is generally a good practice across institutions of higher learning to commit to a single learning management system, and then develop a common course layout across most all of the courses offered in it. That does not mean instructional strategies or assignments cannot be vastly different between courses (Moore & Kearsley, 2011).

Class Procedures and Expectations

Another important element in assuring student success is providing students with information regarding ways that the activities in the course will meet the course objectives. Students need to know they are meeting a goal with each assignment so they will feel they are accomplishing tasks effectively (Cercone, 2008). Students should be provided with valuable resources linked to outcomes for the course. Real world examples and simulations can provide ways for students to connect content to life experiences (Cercone, 2008). One way to provide these connections are through discussion forums. An instructor can post a case study or scenario and ask a question to spark discussion of the topic. Learning Management Systems now provide ways for this to be linked to graded assignments and allows options that require students to interact with one another more than one time. It is important that the expectations of this discussion forum assignment be outlined in the syllabus and course outline of the course (Moore & Kearsley, 2011).

Technical Issues

Although some technical expertise is needed to ensure instructors and students can communicate effectively, instructors should not be required to provide students with 24/7 technical support. However, all institutions should have a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week technical support department. At some institutions this is provided by the IT Department, but most of the time at rural community colleges this is purchased with the Learning Management System. Students can either call a phone number, send an email, or type chat messages and be connected with a technical support technician to help assist the student with his or her problem (Stewart & Strudler, 2004).

Instructors may argue that more and more technical expertise is needed to teach an online course (Yang, 2005). For example, instructors will need to know what to do if a student is taking an exam and their screen freezes or their internet connection is interrupted. This is a very common issue. The instructor must then log in to the Learning Management System and follow steps to reset the exam for the student. This is primarily handled by the instructor, although some instructors may allow the IT Department at their institution to provide this service to the student (Stewart & Strudler, 2004).

Hyperlinks and Navigation

When instructors are developing and building a course in an online environment, they must understand that student success in the course is directly linked to how difficult it is to navigate the course (Fredericksen, 2000). One way to foster student success in online courses is by ensuring that the navigation of the online course is simple and uncluttered. A basic navigational listing of course assignments and elements (usually placed flush left), and next and previous arrows or buttons often meets this need (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). Another way to ensure

success is to number or label the learning units (modules, assignments, quizzes, etc.) in a way that helps the learner understand its relative location in the course (Moore & Kearsley, 2011).

When designing the online course instructors must also provide learners with a comprehensive navigational overview of the course (the equivalent of a “site map” for an Internet site). This can be accomplished through an expandable navigation listing, a pull-down menu of all content in the course, or through a simple “Course overview” or “Course outline” link that leads to a global overview. Further, the learner should be able to click to any of the content elements in the overview (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). When building content for online courses instructors must think like a student.

Content Delivery

One of the most effective ways to present content in an online course is through a combination of concepts, activities, and technologies. It is important to remember that just as in traditional courses, online learners have a variety of learning styles (Swan, 2003). Demonstrations, narrated lectures, and other types of multimedia can foster the development of content mastery. Demonstrations can be done through screenshots or software. These technologies can show a process such as solving a problem or navigating a technology to complete a task. Some technologies, such as Jing or screencast-o-matic.com, allow for video screen capturing allowing for audio voiceover while video recording what is happening on the creators computer screen. A lecture narrative may also be used to help provide students with better classroom environment. Faculty may also post lecture narratives as documents or as media files. Lecture narratives help students see the main ideas being conveyed through activities in the course (Moore & Kearsley, 2011).

Another way to ensure student success in mastery of course content is by using Discussion Boards to create interactive learning experiences for students. By allowing students to interact with their peers they are able to state their thoughts, formulate opinions, or synthesize information from various sources, not simply stating information back in the forum (Stewart & Strudler, 2004).

Instructor and Peer Interaction

A popular myth among faculty at community colleges is that online learning is going to replace the instructor. For example, Zirkin and Sumler (1995) examined the effects of interactivity and learning. Their research concluded that there is a positive relationship between the levels of course interactivity and student learning and satisfaction. They stated, “The weight of evidence from the research reviewed was that increased student involvement by immediate interaction resulted in increased learning as reflected by test performance, grades, and student satisfaction.” In addition, Waits (2001) suggested that instructors provide an important and necessary role in engaging students and providing important interactive learning experiences (Stewart & Strudler, 2004).

Instructors must understand when agreeing to instruct an online course that it can be much more time consuming than a face-to-face course. Instructors at the community college level may not be full-time employees; they may be industry employees teaching as an adjunct instructor. These part-time or adjunct employees must balance the needs of the “regular” world with the needs of their teaching responsibilities. It may be very difficult for them to provide “office hours” for students when the majority of the work they do in the course may take place outside of the “normal” business hours of the college. These instructors may find it more beneficial to record lectures and study sessions and allow students to play them back at a time more convenient for the student (Stewart & Strudler, 2004).

Faculty Role

Adjunct and full-time faculty make up the population of instructors at rural community colleges. As indicated by the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), 48% of instructional faculty in degree-granting institutions are adjuncts. While research highlights the applied perspective, critical expertise and real-world experience of these adjuncts as advantages to instruction (Mueller, 2013) the more commonly discussed advantage of adjunct faculty is the financial benefit to the university. Simply stated, adjunct faculty teach for less money than traditional tenure-track faculty (Mueller, 2013). In addition, reliance on adjunct faculty provides community colleges with increased scheduling flexibility that allows the university to add or cancel courses in response to enrollment numbers (Berry, 1999). Similarly, since adjunct pay is dependent upon actual course offerings (rather than annual contract) community colleges can avoid paying salaries for courses that are cancelled due to low enrollments.

Beyond the monetary and scheduling benefits, adjunct faculty provide a host of benefits to the online learner. Online students (primarily non-traditional learners) report that the real-world, applied expertise of adjunct faculty, along with their evening/weekend availability, are more amenable to their expectations. Online learners value adjunct faculty who are actively working in the real-world, flexible and aligned with customer-service orientations of education (Lyon, 2007; Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009). Distance learning adjuncts, especially those who are physically removed, are particularly vulnerable to feeling disconnected from the institutional environment. This feeling of being disconnected has led many faculty to feel they are not offering their students the highest quality education. The overall conclusion one can draw from research on online adjunct faculty is that the absence of face-to-face meetings apparently does not decrease faculty's loyalty and motivation. However, the presence of such events is likely to increase loyalty and motivation for the simple reason that face-to-face meetings with

administration and other faculty in a professional development setting would allow instructors to enrich their skills and consequently serve their students better, which most adjuncts identify as the ultimate object of their commitment. If the school enables faculty to enrich their own academic life and thereby become better teachers by arranging face-to-face meetings, then the sense of loyalty that instructors feel toward their students will presumably extend, by virtue of its intermediary role, to the institution as well (Dolan, 2011).

The resulting challenge lies in expanding the scope and focus of programming to meet the needs of a diverse faculty body comprised of full-time, adjunct, face-to-face, and online faculty. Key factors in this shift involve changing the culture of adjunct faculty, increasing engagement in the university community, promoting investment in professional development initiatives, scheduling, access and scalability of initiatives (Palloff & Platt, 2013).

It is essential to provide a learning community for online faculty (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). Whether an instructor embraces online learning or not, it is essential for them to be provided appropriate support and training during a transition to online teaching. They must receive instruction and be provided with specific ways to be a successful online instructor.

Role of Learning Management System

Learner satisfaction “with an online environment is complex and multidimensional and includes a wide range of factors” (Palmer & Holt, 2009, p. 101). Students must be comfortable using the Learning Management System for mastery of course content to take place. Student satisfaction with a Learning Management system has been shown to be linked to orientation and strong exposure to the Learning Management System. Palmer and Holt (2009) found that the more students participate frequently online, the more satisfied they feel with online courses. Technology support is essential to a successful online learning program. Strong technical

support is linked to student and faculty satisfaction. Selwyn (2007) found that a lack of technical support contributes to learner dissatisfaction and is a significant problem for those participating in online learning. One of the major subjects regarding student satisfaction discussed in the literature is usability (Koohang & du Plassis, 2004). Usability is defined by Koohang and du Plassis (2004) as the “influential dynamic of a product or system’s capacity to fulfill the users’ interactive needs and expectations” (Green, Inan, & Denton, 2012).

Online Orientation Program

Research shows many students feel that online learning is easier and simpler than taking a traditional course (Picciano, 2002). Despite great success with online learning, several concerns remain regarding students feeling isolated once they enroll in an online course. If students are unable to figure out how to engage actively in online learning communities, their feelings of isolation and loneliness may be exacerbated (McInnerney & Roberts 2004). Interaction with others is important for success in online learning environments; therefore, students need to know how to interact skillfully with others to pursue academic online activities that require it. Collaboration and cooperative learning are common themes in online courses today (Cho, 2012).

As a solution, many administrators and faculty have suggested implementing an online student orientation. Ali and Leeds (2009) found online students who attended an orientation performed significantly better than students who did not attend an orientation to online learning; therefore an orientation program of some kind is very important to help them develop positive learning experiences in online learning environments. A concern often addressed in orientation to online learning programs is technical difficulties. If the technology employed by an institution is new to learners they must gain familiarity with the technology before they will be able to learn

the content of the course (Kirkwood & Price, 2005). In a qualitative study of registered nurses' experiences with web-based learning, online students were reportedly unable to give the course content sufficient attention because they spent most of their time learning how to use the Learning Management System (Atack, 2003). Instructors continue to complain that they must answer the same technical questions again and again. Some online students feel that students are not successful in online courses because they are simply not ready to take online courses. They lack understanding of the importance of online learning and how to be a successful online student. Online orientation programs should be systematically designed from the perspective of student learning (Cho, 2012). Online orientation programs should provide a holistic benefit to students, beginning with technical difficulties students might encounter and ending with how to become a successful online student.

Salmon (2004), a noted expert in online moderation and facilitation, made a number of useful and practical suggestions about inducting online learners. In particular, she identified the need to limit the amount of content-specific information and activity in the early stages, and to focus on activities that promote the formation of an individual's identity online, the development of learning group cohesion and the setting of group norms, expectations and the rules around online discussions. This researcher also advocated the simplification/limitation of navigation options early on and releasing the content as learners gain mastery with some of the basic skills. This would have the effect of reducing some of the cognitive overloading that learners experience at this stage.

A recent study conducted at Monroe Community College (MCC) in Rochester, New York, found issues related to non-success in an online course usually occurs at the beginning or just prior to the beginning of the course. MCC found this trend to be important because more

focus should be on additional support of e-readiness orientation. Based on survey findings at Monroe Community College, some topics that need to be reinforced include student expectations of the online environment and how to access student-support services needed specifically for first time online students. Research showed that a mandatory online orientation is needed to effectively communicate learner expectations to first time online students (Fetzner, 2013).

Orientation programs can be offered in a traditional format or at a distance. Orientation programs should not be provided only at the beginning of a semester. They should be in place throughout the semester to build a community of online learning for the students taking online courses. At most community colleges all students are enrolled in one course that provides technical support, institutional support, and student service support.

Student Factors and Retention Rates

While many studies discuss ways to improve the learning environment so that students are successful, oftentimes the decision to drop an online course is unrelated to factors controlled by the community college and more linked to a lack of persistence on behalf of the student. Many studies have been published identifying low retention rates in online courses, but not much is known about how to identify the student who is at risk of dropping or failing an online course.

Bandura's (1986) theory of "self-efficacy" and where an individual perceives their "locus of control" to reside is proposed by Martinez (2003) as an important factor with regard to attrition in eLearning. In her research on adults employed in corporate settings and undertaking eLearning, Martinez suggested that learners with a strong internal locus of control show greater motivation and persistence in their eLearning endeavors than believe their lives are controlled by external events. According to Hart (2012), persistence is a complex phenomenon variable that has been associated with student success. Most literature points to communication with the

instructor, motivation, and peer and family support being used to overcome barriers to persistence and lead the student to success in an online course (Lee, 2011). Lack of persistence results in failure to complete the course or in failure to continue with a program of study (Muller, 2008). Early identification of the student who may not succeed in an online course can allow application of evidence-based interventions by the educator to strengthen student persistence.

Marie Fetzner, adjunct instructor at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, was an advocate for the use of appropriate technologies to support student's success. Dr. Fetzner was instrumental in improving student success in online courses at Monroe Community College (MCC). MCC has been offering online courses in some format since 1997.

Monroe Community College created a telephone survey conducted by reaching out to students with grade of C or lower in online courses. The survey instrument was developed using the framework from M. Garland's work, "Student Perceptions of the Situational, Institutional Dispositional and Epistemological Barriers to Persistence." The survey instrument was tested for reliability and validity by MCC faculty, online students, and staff and administrators including instructional designers, research office staff, and academic and educational technology staff members. The names and contact information of unsuccessful online students were pulled from the college's database. The MCC survey for unsuccessful MCC online students consists of a 20-question survey that was conducted over the telephone.

The students from the survey reported that they did not know what to expect from an online course, they were not sure where to go for help, and didn't realize the time commitment and organizational skills required in an online course. Monroe Community College found the research conducted provided an area in need of improvement regarding unsuccessful online students. MCC used the findings to assist the college in the enhancement, development, and

assessment of online student support services, in an effort to support the success of all online students (Fetzner, 2013). The findings were also used to design some of the interview questions in this study.

The most interesting findings of the study were in regards to student support service questions which included, “What advice would you give to students who are considering registering for an online course?” The results were considered as surrogate data to help to determine the types of student support services that unsuccessful online students felt that they needed. These data were able to inform MCC about ways to improve student performance by offering an orientation course and what topics should be covered in this course (Fetzner, 2013).

Other findings that impacted the performance of MCC online students were as follows:

- The age and time of registration are each significant contributors to grade performance of MCC’s online students (>25 years of age or above increases performance).
- The best chance of an online student getting a grade of C or better occurs when they register five or more weeks before the beginning of the semester.
- The greater the number of prior higher education credit hours earned increases the chances of getting a C or better in the students’ online course.

The MCC study found a few negative attributes associated with this study. Dr. Fetzner mentioned the following cons to this study: it is difficult to reach unsuccessful online students, unsuccessful students may feel embarrassed to discuss their reasons for non-success, institutional contact data may be out of date quickly, it is time consuming to collect the data, and a single study site may not be generalizable (Fetzner, 2013). For a study similar to the MCC study ESCC must consider the following changes to the study, what ways may unsuccessful students be

reached instead of by phone, how can we better track unsuccessful students, how can ESCC make unsuccessful students must comfortable sharing their opinions and stories with the ESCC administration of online learning.

Summary

Distance learning has developed over many years and has evolved to meet the growing demands for distance learning opportunities. Student satisfaction with distance education opportunities is linked to their success, and their success is often linked to their ability to function as successful independent learner. While students must be sufficiently independent and self-disciplined in pursuing distance learning, faculty and administrators must consider many factors in helping students overcome barriers to effective and efficient implementation of distance education courses and programs. Given the rapid development of technology, it has been critical that institutions are attentive to the level of support required by both distance learners and faculty who are teaching distance courses. Faculty who were expert in traditional classrooms must be assisted as they cope with new and often intimidating technologies (Larreamendy-Joerns, & Leinhardt, 2006). Structures must be built into programs and colleges that provide the necessary resources and support for all those involved.

This chapter has examined the elements that support and hinder student success in online learning in community colleges. The next chapter will detail methodological practices used to evaluate unsuccessful online students.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This chapter includes a detailed description of the research methodology that was utilized in the study. The chapter begins with a statement of the purpose of the study. This is followed by the research questions, data collection, and the analysis procedures. Particular attention is given to the role of the researcher. The chapter ends with a summary to illustrate the linkages among the main sections presented as part of the research design methodology for this study.

Purpose of the Study

Since research on online learning for students who attend community colleges is limited, this study investigated the issue by evaluating student perceptions of the quality of their online learning experiences, the barriers to their success, and potential actions that might enhance their learning experiences. It also investigated whether barriers to success differed among the general population of online students and students who were unsuccessful in their online learning classes. The study occurred at a rural community college in Southeast Alabama. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are community college students overall perceptions of the quality and value of their online distance education courses?
2. What do community college students view as the primary barriers to their success in online learning?
3. What barriers do community college students who are unsuccessful in online learning perceive as being barriers to their success?

4. What do students recommend as strategies for improving online instruction?
5. In what ways, if any, do perceptions of students who have been unsuccessful in online learning differ from those of the general population of online students?
6. To what extent are their differences in these perceptions based on gender, age, and ethnicity

Significance of the Study

The ability to understand student's perceptions of their online learning experiences, their failure to succeed in online learning, and ways that this form of learning could be improved could greatly enhance the ability of community college administrators to make informed decisions relative to distance learning program improvements. The information should also be valuable in arriving at improvements and modifications in course content and delivery methodology as well as in improving the overall online learning process. Distance learning students' perceptions could provide valuable understanding that could be useful in improving both the quality of the experiences and the retention rates of distance learners at community colleges.

The study should be of value to community college administrators and faculty who are developing and delivering online learning. It may also be of interest to community college students who are engaging in online programs. Finally, the study will add to the research base that examines online learning in community colleges and in higher education and may foster additional research on this important topic. Results of this study may provide the basis or incentive to conduct further studies into the relationship of student satisfaction in distance learning and traditional classrooms.

Research Methods

The use of multiple data sources is one characteristic of mixed methods case study research design as noted by Creswell (2013). Mixed methods design involves the intentional collection of both quantitative and qualitative data and the combination of the strengths of each to answer research questions (Creswell & Clark, 2007). In a mixed methods design, multiple forms of data are collected, such as survey data, discussion board posts, and interviews; then all the data are reviewed and organized into categories or themes that cut across all data sources (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Yin (2003) explained that using evidence from a variety of sources in a way that encourages convergent lines of inquiry increases construct validity and allows the researcher to triangulate data in order to identify themes across all sources. The researcher utilized multiple data sources for purposes of enhancing data credibility (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Each data source was collected and used as piece of the puzzle that contributed to the researcher's understanding of the entire phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Surveys were used to collect and organize quantitative data to show the researcher the problem, the qualitative descriptive data collected through the interview process assisted in answering these guiding questions formulated by analyzing the quantitative data and added depth to understanding student's perceptions of the factors that hindered their success in online learning.

Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of 491 community college students who were enrolled in Southeast community college's distance learning and traditional classroom programs during any of the academic terms of calendar year 2011–2014. Of the population of 491 students, a sample of 400 students responded to the quantitative survey. Forty-six students responded to the open ended questions in the survey and 24 students participated in the discussion board.

An additional population of students who were successful in traditional classroom courses, but unsuccessful in online learning classes comprised the population for an interview process implemented during this study. Forty-six students were sent letters asking them to participate in this study. Eighteen responded and comprised the sample for the interviews.

The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling. The overall criteria for sample consideration included: 1) a grade of less than C on an online learning course; (2) demographics: age, gender, and ethnicity; and 3) willingness to discuss positive or negative online experience with the researcher. The researcher has access to student demographic data through the Office of Institutional Effectiveness for institutional improvement purposes.

Context of the Study

The Community

Southeast Community College is located in a small community in the southeast corner of Alabama. It is approximately 75 miles south of Montgomery, the capital of Alabama, and 25 miles west of Dothan, home of the National Peanut Festival. Florida's Gulf Coast lies 80 miles to the south. The communities of Fort Rucker, Daleville, and Ozark are east, south and west of the City of Progress.

This city is affectionately known as the City of Progress because of its thriving community founded on the principle that with the right mix of people, adversity can easily turn into diversity. It is home to a diverse mix of business, agriculture, and industry. The community has a rich military heritage thanks to its close relationship and proximity to neighboring Fort Rucker, the Home of Army Aviation.

In 2010, based on new US Census data, the city was named Alabama's "Boom Town," boasting a 25.3% growth over 10 years. The 26,574-person population provides a quality of life that integrates small town togetherness with urban vitality.

The School

On September 25, 1965, the first freshman class, number 256 students, was registered at the Southeast Community College. These students rented rooms in the downtown area and in the education building of the First Methodist Church. Fortunately, these makeshift arrangements lasted only during the first year, for in the fall of 1966 the present campus, which at the time constituted two buildings, was occupied. This campus has grown and now consists of seven modern buildings situated on a beautifully landscaped site.

The mission of Southeast Community College, including the Alabama Aviation Center, is to serve students and communities by providing educational opportunities that enhance the quality of life and promote economic development. Southeast Community College strives to offer students with an affordable quality college education by striving:

- To Prepare Students for Transfer
- To Prepare Students for Immediate Employment and Career Advancement
- To Assist Persons in Formulating and Achieving Their Educational Goals
- To Assist Persons in Improving Learning Skills, Overcoming Educational Deficiencies, and Adapting to Technological Changes
- To Improve the Social, Economic, and Cultural/Recreational Life in Our Communities

Southeast Community College has been named a Top 120 Community College in the nation by the ASPEN Institute for two years in a row. Experienced instructors, opportunities for

student involvement, and convenient classes make Southeast Community College a top choice for students to further their education. Students planning to transfer to a four-year institution may prepare by taking courses necessary for any major field of study. Plans of study completed in accordance with the Statewide Transfer and Articulation Reporting Systems (STARS) will transfer to a state public four-year institution. Students may take courses in the traditional classroom manner or through distance learning online. At Southeast Community College, faculty and staff are focused on creating a total collegiate experience. Students have the opportunity to get involved with an assortment of student organizations, play on a variety of athletics teams, or participate in an outstanding fine arts department. Southeast Community College has locations in across Alabama and offers classes online for convenience. The College is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and grants associate in arts, associate in science, and associate in applied science degrees, as well as various program certificates.

In addition to its primary focus on academic excellence, throughout its history, Southeast Community College has emphasized student service through special attention to the needs of certain groups of citizens and a varied program of student activities. Special programs and services for employees of existing businesses and industries and military service members and their families are available.

The College received state and national recognition for a variety of student activities. For more than 30 years, the Campus chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, the national honor society of American two-year colleges, was recognized as one of the top chapters in the nation. In 1984 and 1992, the chapter was named The Most Distinguished Chapter in the Nation, and in 1986–87 and 2001–02, and again in 2010, the sponsors were named Most Distinguished Sponsor, and the

Chapter continues to be placed in the top ten percent internationally. The chapter is also active at the Alabama Aviation Center at Ozark. The First Impressions Team (FIT), which leads the orientation programs for new students, has been recognized by the Southern Regional Orientation Workshop of the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) for outstanding leadership. The College's show choir, the Entertainers, was consistently rated Superior in competitions and the group has received "Best in Class" awards numerous times. The group received all of the first place honors in the Show Choir Category of the Alabama College Association Music Showcase.

Athletics have been an important part of the Southeast Community College collegiate experience as well. The baseball team won the Alabama State Junior College Championship in 1982 and the Southern Division Championship in 1986. In 1985, the College's Women earned the runner-up trophy in the state championship tournament in women's basketball and were fourth in the state championship tournament in 2003. Also in 2003, the men's basketball team was runner-up in the Alabama Junior College Division I Conference.

Throughout its history, Southeast Community College has been successful in attracting federal and private funds that have enabled the College to develop innovative programs and services. The College has received four major five-year development grants and three endowment grants totaling approximately \$9 million from the U.S. Department of Education's Title III Strengthening Institutions Program. In addition to comprehensive faculty development and curriculum improvement projects, these grants have financed the purchase of state-of-the-art computer equipment throughout the campus and other projects focused on student retention. Other federal and foundation grants enabled the College to establish the Tutorial Assistance Program for Students—now Student Support Services—the Adult Basic Education Program, the

Workplace Literacy Program, Student Academic Support Services Laboratory, and the National Science Foundation scholarship program. In 2000 and 2001, National Science Foundation grants provided scholarships to students majoring in science, engineering, or computer information science. In 2005, a Community-Based Job Training Grant was awarded by the Department of Labor to build the capacity of the College to train technicians for the skills required to succeed in high-growth, high-demand aviation industries.

Enrollment of students in online courses at Southeast Community College has increased over the last few years, while student success based on grade distribution for Distance Courses has continued to remain well below grades for traditional courses.

As the data reveal there are discrepancies between successes in an online course when compared to traditional courses. The study sought to determine the perceptions of all students as to the quality of the online courses, what might be done to improve them, and why these discrepancies exist.

Data Collection

This mixed methods study utilized a variety of data collection instruments. Data were collected across a variety of phases.

Data Collection Approaches and Research Questions

Table 5 displays which data collection instruments were specifically used to answer each research question. Distance Learning student data was collected using the Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey. Also included as data sources were student interviews as well as forums from discussion boards. All forms of data collected focused on perceptions of online students, barriers for success in online courses, and ways the online learning process could

be improved. Alignment of research questions with data sources demonstrated triangulation of data and added strength to the inquiry (Cohen & Manion, 2000).

Table 5

Data Collection Instruments and Research Questions

Question	Data Collection Instruments
What are community college students overall perceptions of the quality and value of their online distance education courses?	Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey
What do community college students view as the primary barriers to their success in online learning?	Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey, Discussion Board Forum
What barriers do community college students who are unsuccessful in online learning perceive as being barriers to their success?	Interviews
What do students recommend as strategies for improving online instruction?	Discussion Board Forum Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey Interviews
In what ways, if any, do students who have had an unsuccessful online learning experiences perceptions of barriers to their success differ from those of the general population of online students?	Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey Interviews Discussion Board
To what extent are their differences in these perceptions based on gender, age group?	Interviews

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

As noted in Table 5, there were six research questions that guided this study. Three primary data collection instruments or processes were used to gather information. They are described in detail in the sections that follow.

Student evaluation of online course and instructor survey. The *Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey* was a survey of 491 students, administered by Southeast Community Colleges Department of Institutional Effectiveness at the beginning and end of the 2013/2014 school year. The survey was conducted online through the Learning Management System canvas.

The Student Evaluation of Online Courses measures distance learning students' perception of course quality, delivery technology and administrative services of online courses. There are 20 items addressing course quality. The response choices are in the format of a four-point Likert scale: 4 = Strongly Agree, 3 = Agree, 2 = Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree. The items that relate to quality of course materials and effectiveness of instructor are:

- a. Attainment of Learning Outcomes stated in the online syllabus
- b. Assignments/projects/case studies were appropriate for this course
- c. Text and/or readings were appropriate for this course
- d. Examination(s) sampled the important material in the course
- e. Overall quality of the course material
- f. Accessibility of appropriate resources to complete assignments
- g. Amount of student-to-student interaction
- h. Amount of instructor-to-student interaction

- i. Quality of guidance/feedback provided by the Designated Instructor
- j. Timeliness of feedback from the Designated Instructor

In addition to the four-point Likert scale questions on the survey, students were asked a series of three open-ended questions at the end of the survey.

1. What were the most important factors that contributed to your success in this course?
2. What are the barriers you feel prevent your success in this course?
3. What are ways we can improve the overall online learning experience at ESCC?

Discussion boards. The second source of data was discussion board forums of all responses to look at hindering factors and potential ways of improving online learning. The discussion board forum is an area in Canvas where participants discuss a topic or a group of related topics. Within each forum, users can create multiple threads. A thread includes the initial post and all replies to it. Instructors and students can create forums and threads to organize discussions into units or topics relevant to the course.

A discussion board is referred to as “reader centered” or focusing upon the user of information as opposed to the creator of information (Harman, 2005). This assumption that the discussion board (and its precursors) focuses upon the user of information parallels the idea that learning objects are useful only when put into context (i.e. the process of contextualization). The discussion board is an integral part of e-learning (Harman, 2005). Each of the major platforms for e-learning incorporates a discussion board. The discussion board, however, is rarely, if ever, thought of as a learning object, per se. Instead a discussion board is usually conceived of as a place (albeit virtual) in which learning objects are delivered, stored, and used (Barta-Smith & Hathaway, 2000).

The discussion board forums were originally designed by the Associate Dean of Online Learning to improve the online learning program at Southeast Community College. The administrator posted the question, “How can we make online learning better for you?” For this study, the question was changed slightly to ask, “We are planning the Fall Online Courses. How can we make online learning at Southeast Community College better for you in the Fall Semester?” The discussion board forum was available to all Southeast Community College students for a period of three weeks. The discussion board forum results were analyzed in Summer of 2014. The Associate Dean of Online Learning managed the discussion board forum to ensure all students were able to communicate their perceptions of online learning at Southeast Community College. The researcher conducted an analysis of the responses from the Summer Semester of 2014.

Interviews. The third set of data involved interviewing students to delve more deeply into the issue of what hindered or fostered their success. The interviews were used to explore some of the issues from the discussion boards and survey. A purposeful sampling technique was used to select interviewees. The interviews were semi-structured, open-ended interviews. They allowed the researcher to probe beneath the surface in a way that generates an all-inclusive understanding of the interviewee’s perceptions related to online learning. Interview questions were all open-ended in order to obtain thick descriptions of online learning experiences at Southeast Community College. These interviews allowed for data to be collected that was rich in knowledge and perceptions of individuals who had actually been enrolled and had not be successful in online course at Southeast Community College.

A purposeful sample was used. Creswell (2009) noted that in qualitative research, “the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central

phenomenon”, which is best achieved by using purposeful sampling strategies. A random sampling strategy would be inappropriate for the exploration of the central phenomenon of this study because the purpose here is not to generate a representative sample and then generalize the results to other coordination mechanisms or other contexts, but rather to learn from people who are ‘information rich’ and can best help to understand the specific interest of this research.

To be eligible for this study, potential participants must have been unsuccessful in an online course at ESCC. After receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board, the researcher sent an email to all students at Southeast Community College via the learning management system Canvas. The email included the purpose of the study, described participant criteria, and identified confidentiality issues. The researcher’s phone number was included in the email so potential participants could call the researcher and have an opportunity to learn more about the study. A copy of the consent form was also sent to participants. Eighteen students responded that they would be willing to participate. Creswell (2007) discusses the importance of selecting the appropriate number of candidates for interviews, for example more than five. For this reason, the researcher felt eighteen candidates would provide a more broad information rich study. Creswell also suggests the importance of acquiring participants who will be willing to openly and honestly share information or “their story” (Creswell, 2007). This was another consideration in selecting the interviewees.

Participants were asked to take part in one in-depth interview, lasting approximately 1–2 hours. After the 18 interview participants were identified, the researcher called each participant to make arrangements for a first interview. If the researcher was unable to make contact via e-mail message inviting the potential participants to reply or call the researcher, the researcher then tried to reach the participant by telephone. Arrangements for interviews were mostly made via e-

mail, but the telephone was utilized in a few cases. By providing access to the researcher via cell phone or e-mail, the participants were put at ease about the researcher's sensitivity to the privacy of potential participants.

The interviews occurred in a private room at Southeast Community College. The interviews contained broad, open-ended questions (referenced in Appendix 1) that encouraged the participants to express their perceptions and experiences as an online student. The interview covered topics about the students' past and present school experiences, perceptions about online learning and why they were unsuccessful in the course. Participants were reminded that breaks were allowed if they felt the need them. They were informed that to protect their identity, they needed to provide a pseudonym. Each participant was provided with a consent letter (see Appendix 2) and told that they might withdraw from the study at any point.

The interviewees were transcribed and students were allowed to see their interview document and make any changes, as member check procedure. During analysis, the researcher contacted some students for clarification when it seemed appropriate.

Confidentiality. The interviews were conducted in an office that provided ample privacy while at the same time providing the participant with a comfortable environment that placed the interviewer and participant at a table with chairs that were alike and in a room that offered little to no distractions. When the participants agreed to be interviewed, a date, time, and site for the interview were established collaboratively through phone calls.

Each participant was given a pseudonym for her/himself. Names in transcripts were deleted, as were the names of schools. The researcher's notes of names of individuals and matching pseudonyms were kept separate from each other and other identifying information was kept in a secure place.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to determine reasons students were unsuccessful in online courses at Southeast Community College, a three-phase mixed methods data collection study was used. The first phase of this collection process involved accessing data provided by students who had completed the Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor questionnaire during 2013–2014. These data were accessed with the assistance of Southeast Community College’s Department of Institutional Research (IR). A comments section of this instrument asking students to give feedback on their experiences in online learning was used as part of the qualitative analysis. Next, the researcher conducted an analysis of an online discussion board forum open to students in online education that was provided so that they could discuss ways the institution could improve online learning. Findings from the comments section of the survey and the online discussion board were combined and analyzed as a whole. Finally, the researcher identified and interviewed eighteen unsuccessful online students and conducted an analysis of their feedback on factors that hindered their online learning.

During this study, data were analyzed using a variety of methods in order to answer the six research questions. Research Question 1 was concerned with students’ overall perceptions of the quality and value of their online distance education courses. To answer research question 1 the researcher used the quantitative data from the *Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Questionnaire*. Descriptive statistics involving frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the data provided by Southeast Community College’s Department of Institutional Research. Means and standard deviations were utilized to validate the probable accuracy of the data. Tables indicating the frequency and percentage of repeat responses to items by category were used to display the data.

Research question 2 focused on what students view as the primary barriers to their success in online learning. This question was answered by conducting a content analysis of student responses from the Student Evaluation of Online Course comments and Instructor Questionnaire comments section as well discussion board posts. Research question 3 outlined barriers community college students who are unsuccessful in online learning perceive as barriers to their success. Through information rich interviews, the researcher was able to gain insight into student's online experiences. After the interview phase, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis of participant responses and these responses were organized by theme and category.

The fourth research question deals with strategies for improvement as suggested by online students. This question was vital in the implications for further research as well as recommendations of ways to remove barriers of success for online students at the institution where the study took place, as well as other institutions. This question was answered using all data sources.

The fifth research question addressed what ways, if any, do students who have had an unsuccessful online learning experiences perceptions of barriers to their success differ from those of the general population of online students. This question was addressed by conducting a content analysis of the similarities and differences between responses of the general population of online students using data from the comments on the survey and discussion boards and the interview data from students who had not been successful in online learning.

The sixth research question addressed to what extent were there differences in the perceptions of online students based on gender, age, and ethnicity. The researcher conducted this analysis by analyzing comments made by the 18 unsuccessful online learning participants. Each

comment was placed in one of the four themes along with demographic information for each participant.

Role of the Researcher

Insider research refers to when researchers conduct research with populations of which they are also members (Kanuha, 2000) so that the researcher shares an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants (Asselin, 2003). The complete membership role gives researchers a certain amount of legitimacy and/or stigma (Adler & Adler, 1987). This insider role status frequently allows researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants. Therefore, participants are typically more open with researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered. The benefit to being a member of the group one is studying is acceptance. One's membership automatically provides a level of trust and openness in your participants that would likely not have been present otherwise. One has a starting point (the commonality) that affords access into groups that might otherwise be closed to "outsiders." Participants might be more willing to share their experiences because there is an assumption of understanding and an assumption of shared distinctiveness; it is as if they feel, "You are one of us and it is us versus them (those on the outside who don't understand)." It is important to note that as an inside researcher I had access to data used for institutional improvement through my position at Southeast Community College.

As a researcher within the institution being studied, particularly one who utilizes a qualitative methodology, my role was very complex. Beginning with the identification of a meaningful topic, formulating an appropriate research question, and developing a comprehensive research plan were difficult and challenging tasks. As a researcher, I am also responsible for reducing any personal biases that I might have. For example, I did not want to influence

participants in such a way as to force responses that I believed a given person should have, knowing that a person's view of online learning may differ from my view. I had the responsibility of promoting objectivity in my study. In an effort to clarify my preferences and ideas, I included a discussion of my personal beliefs as they are related to the overall topic of interest. The following subsection includes a presentation of my unique contribution.

Unique Contribution

Ultimately, this research was inspired by my interest and work in the educational field. More specifically, having spent many years as an assistant director of the college-campus Online Learning Services, I had a particular interest in this aspect of learning. On another level, I feel that my unique contribution stems from three areas: (a) personal background, (b) educational background, and (c) my own personality type.

I feel strongly about the role education plays in my life and I certainly believe that education allows for a sense of empowerment. However, I know that students face a variety of challenges during the educational process, particularly older students, and the sense of empowerment can easily be overpowered by the levels of frustration. Success in online learning can be one of the significant factors in achieving a degree needed to reduce the frustration and strive toward the goal of a better life.

I am fortunate enough to have grown up within a family unit that always promoted education. The value of being a college graduate was a top priority; this was not just hoped for, it was expected. Although I was raised in a single parent home due to the untimely sudden death of my father at the age of 42, my mother received a college degree and beyond, all while balancing a single parent household that consisted of my brother and me. Many times my mother was forced to take online courses while she balanced our school activities and a job. Because of my mother's

dedication and the example she set for us, I have always been a proponent of online learning. Without online courses she may not have been able to finish her degree, seek employment, and provide the opportunity for me to receive a college education.

As the years progressed and I entered my own college experience, once again I encountered online learning as an option. From an early age I felt a calling into a career in education. After receiving my Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration, I felt the need to pursue a Master's degree in Education. I researched many schools and decided that since I needed to maintain a full-time job, Auburn University's Masters of Education in Business Education, delivered fully-online, met my needs perfectly. Once I received this degree, I was given the opportunity to work at a local community college. My employment as an instructor has allowed me a different view of online learning. I quickly became involved in helping to ensure that the community college students where I worked were receiving a quality online experience. As a faculty member I often have the opportunity to advise students with registration. While advising students, I often question once a student decides to enroll in an online course, how does that person perceive the experience? Is the experience one that impacts the individual in a particular manner and, if so, how? I believe that my role as an academic advisor, like teaching, can have an impact on the academic experiences of a student.

I believe that I have developed a rather structured style of classroom management; yet, I also feel that my approach is student-centered. Due to the level of my students — community college students of various ages — and due to the nature of my subject — personal and career development — I have to place emphasis on the student and incorporate an active learning approach. In teaching life skills, I believe that students must feel comfortable enough to discuss issues and get feedback. The main focus of my teaching philosophy is that education is a

continuous learning process that can be enjoyable and stimulating, even though there is a need for structure and discipline. I provide classroom structure and discipline by planning class-related activities and advising students as they progress through assignments, whether in-class group work or work done independently.

The assumptions I hold for the findings of this study are closely related. It is my belief that students who have experienced online learning will tend to be those who feel learning can be, and should be, enjoyable though there is a need for structure and discipline. I hold this assumption from my own perspectives as both a student and a teacher. In my own educational experiences, I have always tried to maintain a positive attitude and not frown upon the necessary time commitment and extra effort needed to succeed.

In relationship to this study, I especially feel as though it takes a very committed, disciplined, and motivated person to be successful in online courses. It is particularly interesting to explore students' perspectives on the online learning experience. I hope that by addressing online learning from the student's perspective, professionals in academic support positions can learn how to better serve the academic needs of students who enroll in online learning programs.

An additional factor that makes my contribution to this study unique is the position that I hold at a community college. As I previously mentioned, I teach community college students, I am also an advisor, and I currently temporarily hold position of Associate Dean of Online Learning and Instructional Technology. Because of the nature of my various responsibilities, I did have previous contact with some of the participants. I did not consider my job duties to be a limitation of my study, however. This study has no bearing on the student's grade in an online course. As an instructor, I had previous classroom contact with several of the participants and as an advisor, I previously met with a limited number of participants for a very limited amount of

time, from one to possibly three advising sessions that lasted no more than one hour each time. I believe that my contact with these students has allowed these students to answer the research questions openly and honestly. As well, it was because of my experience in Online Learning that I initially began my study. I will assure validity and reliability of this study using standard procedures as described in the sections that follow.

Validation Strategies

As the area of qualitative research increases, social and behavioral scientists critique on the validity of studies that use such methodology. Thus, qualitative researchers utilize various validation strategies to make their studies credible and rigorous (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Ethical Considerations

All of the participants were treated in accordance to the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Auburn University Institutional Review Board (IRB). There is the possibility that students may have felt uncomfortable discussing their experiences or talking about the reasons why they were unsuccessful in an online course. All these considerations were incorporated during the research design stage. Every caution was taken to ensure that the General Population of Online Students felt safe, comfortable, and had the freedom to withdraw from the study if they felt the need to.

Limitations

Because this study deals with the perceptions, knowledge, and experiences of only one group of students it is difficult to establish whether conclusions drawn from this particular case apply elsewhere. The results of the study may or may not be generalizable because we can never know whether the group the researcher investigated is representative of the wider body of “similar” instances. Stake (1995) defined generalizability and in particular natural

generalizability as the degree to which research findings are used to gain understanding of a specific situation and then utilize that understanding to make sense of similar situations.

Additional limitations include the fact that the study only investigated online students, and the participants included only students from one community college. During the data collection process some unsuccessful students may have participated in the survey and discussion boards so the researcher reported successful and unsuccessful student's perceptions in those findings.

Summary

Chapter 3 provided a detailed description of the research methodology that was utilized in the study. The chapter began with a statement of the purpose of the study. This was followed by the research questions, data collection, and analysis procedures. Particular attention was given to the role of the researcher before a comprehensive research plan was outlined. The chapter ended with a summary to illustrate the linkages among the main sections presented as part of the research design methodology for this study. Chapter 4 has been organized to present the analysis of the data collected to respond to each of research questions.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This study sought to develop an increased understanding of community college students' perceptions of the quality of their online learning experiences; the barriers to their success; and actions that might improve the quality of their experiences. The study also sought to identify whether the perceptions of barriers and potential actions to foster success differed between the general population of online students and students who have been unsuccessful in online learning classes and between unsuccessful students based on demographic factors of gender, age, and ethnicity. Six research questions were used to guide the research.

Population and Sample

The overall population for this study consisted of 491 community college students who were enrolled in the community college's online learning and traditional classroom programs during any of the academic terms of calendar years 2011–2014. Of these, 400 responded to the quantitative survey. Forty-six students responded to the open-ended questions in the survey and 24 students participated in the discussion board.

An additional population of students who were successful in traditional classroom courses, but unsuccessful in online learning classes comprised the population for an interview process implemented during this study. Forty-four students were sent letters asking them to participate in this study. Eighteen responded and comprised the sample for the interviews.

The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling. The overall criteria for sample consideration included: 1) a grade of less than C on an online learning course; (2) demographics: age, gender, and ethnicity; and 3) willingness to discuss positive or negative online experience with the researcher.

Research Questions

The six research questions addressed were:

1. What are community college students overall perceptions of the quality and value of their online distance education courses?
2. What do community college students view as the primary barriers to their success in online learning?
3. What barriers do community college students who are unsuccessful in online learning perceive as being barriers to their success?
4. What do students recommend as strategies for improving online instruction?
5. In what ways, if any, do unsuccessful student perceptions of barriers to online learning differ from those of the general population of online students?
6. To what extent are student differences in these perceptions based on gender, age group, and ethnicity?

Results

The results are organized into six sections. Each section reports the findings for one of the research questions.

Students' Perceptions of the Quality and Value of Their Online Education Courses

The researcher used the Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey to determine students' perceptions of the quality and value of their online courses. Data for this

study were collected for calendar year 2014 from the population of undergraduate students enrolled as online learning students. The population for this study consisted of 491 Southeast Community College students enrolled in online courses, of which 400 students completed the Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey. Forty-six students responded to an initial survey related to this study. Twenty-four students participated in a discussion board focused on issues related to online learning.

In order to respond to Research Question 1 as to levels of satisfaction with course quality (i.e., quality of course material, delivery, and effectiveness of the instructor), frequencies and percentages of online student responses were analyzed. The survey contained 20 questions. The population was 491. Four hundred students responded to the survey but not all students responded to all items. There were twenty items on the survey and they fell within six categories. The items were as follows.

Personal Issues (Personal Learning Style)

- Attainment of Learning Outcomes
 - The instructor made the objectives of the course clear.
 - The instructor achieved the stated objectives of the course well.
 - The instructor was well prepared for each class session.
 - The instructor provided meaningful and timely feedback to students.
 - The instructor was readily available for consultation with students.
 - The instructor made the course intellectually challenging for me.

Instructional Strategies

- Text and/or readings were appropriate for this course
 - Quality of instructor's video presentations

- Quality of instruction aides used on the videos
- The instructor was well prepared for each class session.
- Overall quality of the course material
 - I would rate the overall quality of the textbooks/instructional materials as:
 - I would rate the overall quality of the class sessions as:
 - I would rate the overall value of the course to me as:
 - The instructor made the course intellectually challenging for me.
 - The instructional materials used by the instructor were of high quality.

Interaction and Communication

- Amount of instructor-to-student interaction
 - The instructor was readily available for consultation with students.
 - The instructor provided appropriate opportunities for interaction with other students.
- Quality of guidance/feedback provided by instructor
 - I would rate the overall quality of the guidance and feedback I received my instructor as:
 - The instructor provided feedback to all assignments and exams in an organized manner.
- Timeliness of feedback from designated instructor
 - The instructor provided meaningful and timely feedback to students.
 - The instructor answered email messages in a timely manner.

Table 6 presents the participants responses under each category along with the total responses for each category and the frequencies of those responses in the scale from very

satisfied to very dissatisfied. The instrument was divided into six sections.

Table 6

Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Item Frequencies and Combined Very Satisfied (VS) and Satisfied (S) Percentages

Survey Item (#)	N	VS	S	% VS+S	D	VD	%D+VD
Attainment of learning outcomes stated in online syllabus	400	205	152	89	33	10	11
Text and/or readings were appropriate for this course	400	245	121	92	24	10	8
Overall quality of the course material	400	254	124	94	19	3	5
Amount of instructor-to-student interaction	400	241	117	89	21	21	10
Quality of guidance/feedback provided by instructor	400	228	110	85	38	24	16
Timeliness of feedback from designated instructor	400	158	151	77	72	19	23

N=400 Note. VS=Very Satisfied; S=Satisfied; D=Dissatisfied; VD=Very Dissatisfied

Overall respondents indicated a high level of course satisfaction with each of the aspects of course quality. Over 91% of respondents indicated a high level of satisfaction with three items: Attainment of learning outcomes stated in online syllabus, Text and/or readings were appropriate for this course, and Overall quality of the course material that concerned quality of materials. Only slightly higher were the percentages related to satisfaction with instructor-to-student interaction (92%) and quality of instructor guidance and feedback 90.0%. In regards to

the timeliness of feedback from the designated instructor, respondents failed to meet the criterion of 80% established to determine a high level of course satisfaction. Only 78% of distance students indicated that feedback from their designated instructor was timely. It is important to note that the largest percent (21.9%) of dissatisfied students noted timeliness of feedback from designated instructor to be the issue they encountered most.

The results indicate that most students were satisfied with their online learning experience at Southeast Community College. This analysis provided the basis for the problem the researcher further examined. Although most students are satisfied, many online students are not successful in their courses. To examine why, the researcher examined participant's responses to open-ended questions in the survey and responses to an online student discussion board which focused on online learning.

Students Perceived Barriers to Success

Two sets of data were used to determine students' perceptions of the primary barriers to their online learning success. In addition to the Likert Scale questions, the *Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey* listed three open-ended questions. One of these, "What are the barriers you feel prevent your success in this course?" was used to address this question. Forty-six students responded to the open-ended questions enclosed in this survey. The second set of data came from the online discussion board. There were 24 responses that dealt with issues related to barriers to success.

The researcher combined the comments from both of these data sources and conducted a thematic analysis. The researcher found the comments made in the discussion board forum consistent with comments made on the open-ended question of the *Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey*. A level of at least 10% of the students was established as the

basis including a theme. This analysis based on the Literature Review resulted in three primary themes: Instructional Strategies, Interaction and Communication, and Personal Issues. There were two categories within each of these themes. These are described in detail in the sections that follow. Table 7 shows the number of student responses of each theme.

Table 7

General population of online students Student Perceptions of Barriers to Success

Theme	Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Instructional Strategies (Delivery and Organization)	40	57%
Personal Issues (Lifestyle Issues and School Issues)	20	29%
Interaction and Communication (Instructional and Personal)	10	14%

N = 70

Instructional Strategies

The most mentioned barrier to success was the instructional strategies employed. Forty students or 57% commented that instructional strategies were a barrier to their success. These fell into two primary categories: the way in which instruction was delivered and the way in which instruction was organized.

Delivery. The first theme the researcher found during the analysis dealt with the delivery of instruction. The issues within this category focused primarily on the lack of effective teaching and learning strategies. This made students uneasy and they felt that too much of the burden of teaching and learning was on their shoulders. Students wrote that the instruction was almost

non-existent. For example, students stated that there was limited instruction to the point where they felt like “the only way you can learn from this course is to read the book ourselves,” and you “feel like you are teaching yourself.” Others said that the, “Professor did not teach anything in this course...” “The only way to learn in this course is to read the book ourselves and then when the tests come, we barely know a thing.” ... “Just read the book. Felt like you were teaching yourself.” Thus, it appears that students felt lost many times, and felt as if they were not receiving the guidance and clear instruction needed to learn effectively.

Students also pointed to a lack of variety in instructional strategies noting such things as that “the instructor only provides PowerPoints that cover the material which is very vague,” and “the teacher does not post online lecture videos or offer additional learning materials.” Since students learn in a variety of ways, this is particularly difficult for some of them.

Organization. The second category within Instructional Strategies was organization. Students viewed the course as lacking adequate organization, which hindered their ability to grasp the material and succeed in learning. For example, one student stated, “In my math class last semester the course was organized so that all of the material was available to me on the first day of the course. I worked ahead as much as I wanted and finished almost a month early... my microcomputer class we only have the opportunity to do homework type assignments in advance all test are only open for about 3 days. I would have been more successful if I could have worked ahead.” Consistent with the theme of inadequate organization, another student stated, “Quizzes are not accessible in a timely manner and some of the assignments that are not on the calendar.”

The comments were frequently associated with the organization of online course content. Transitioning to an online course is much more than simply creating electronic versions of hard

copy content. Visual aspects of course design in online courses are as critical as the content for effective student learning. One student in the study stated, “There was so much material that I felt I never got to the end. I would like three or four times within each module and there was always something else to read or do.”

At least one respondent felt the online course was quite tedious. Other issues were specific to the online format and may point out some of the limitations of the way the course is organized. For example, one student shared that the “timeline for completing reading material is too short,” and also found a number of issues with assignments, like lost “practice quizzes are not accessible in a timely manner before the test and “assignments are not on the calendar, cannot plan or work ahead of time.” The lack of organization in the course made students uneasy and they felt that too much of the burden of teaching and learning was on them. As one student noted, “I didn’t like the online format. I liked that I could access all of my coursework at one time, but I did not like the way all of the files were in one section. It seemed I was always looking for something.” The online students also noted problems in the integration of instructional materials with testing procedures. One student commented, “It seemed the test bank was not associated with the textbook we were using. The test questions would ask about things we did not cover in the weekly class discussions in Canvas.”

Personal Issues

The second most perceived barrier to success dealt with students’ personal issues. Twenty students or 29% of students stated a personal issue was to blame for their being unsuccessful in an online course. If the student does not have the self-drive to succeed, or see the benefit from successfully finishing a given course, then he or she will not try to invest in the class and thus not succeed. Realizing why he or she needs to succeed becomes the key to

making a decision to invest in a given course which is needed to unlocking the door to success. Self-motivation also helps to empower students to be in control of their own education and keeps them from giving up when they are faced with personal difficulties. There is also a correlation between lack of self-motivation and lack of perseverance. Students with strong self-motivation apply their perseverance, mental capability, and energy to do everything in their power to learn the required knowledge and skills needed to succeed in new courses and programs no matter how hard the task is. Comments from participants in this study were placed in two categories: lifestyle issues and learning or personal styles.

Learning or personal style. A student's learning or personal style controls not only how s/he feels and perceives the world, but also how he or she responds to school work, course learning materials, class policies, instruction, instructional materials, and instructors, etc. Because of this, a student's personal learning style has a major effect on how a student performs and in turn succeeds in a given class. It seemed throughout the data collection students were aware of their learning styles and were willing to find ways to overcome any personal barriers that they faced if possible. However, several students felt that the course did not lend well to different learning styles. For example, one student explained, "I learn better with a variety of audio, visual and hands on learning." Another student said, "I have trouble learning from a PPT without any other interaction... "I need more explanation on how to do problems."

As one student, who knew that she was an auditory learner was distressed to discover, the course had no auditory components. She shared, "Audio instruction is lacking... She suggested that "It would help to have links to YouTube videos to explain things." Said another, who might have been a visual or tactile learner, "I would have done better in the courses if all of the courses

were required to have lecture notes.” This lack of diversity of instruction hindered learning and appeared to frustrate students.

Lifestyle issues. Many student felt their own personal lifestyle issues contributed to them being unsuccessful in online courses. Student responses included, “Not being in school for 20 years...”, “Distractions at home”, and “My own laziness.” Some students reported that online courses require too much or more self-motivation, organization and planning than coursework at a traditional university, particularly in required work for the course. This flexibility is one of the great benefits of online learning. It can also be a drawback for a student who procrastinates, is unable to stick to a routine study schedule, or is not able to complete assignments without daily reminders from a teacher. Other comments related to lifestyle issues included, “Trying to balance time to do my school work,” and “getting enough time to do it and me working nights”, and “I needed to be able to work ahead on my assignments.” One student’s response pointed to personal scheduling, “I signed up for too many classes and I had to drop my online course because it was the most time consuming.”

Interaction and Communication

The third theme dealing with barriers involved the level and type of communication that students had with the instructor. Ten or 14% of students found lack of interaction and communication to be an issue. Although this barrier was not mentioned as often as the barrier of Instructional Strategies, it was identified as an important issue. This theme involved two categories: Personal and Inadequate Instructional Feedback.

Personal. The most often noted problem within the interaction and communication theme was a lack of personal involvement and personal communication by the teacher. Students found their professor largely unavailable and seemingly uninterested in their learning or in

addressing their concerns. This non-communication contributed to students' inability to grasp the learning outcomes presented in the course. Students said things like the professor, "never responds to emails." Others said that there was "very little or no interaction" and "interactions are rare." Said one student, "There were late responses from the instructor." Said another, "There were no responses to my questions." Although some students appear to understand why these interactions are so infrequent, as noted by one student who commented, "The instructor has a full time job and does not have time to respond to students," it is evident that this lack of interaction was detrimental to students and hindered their ability to succeed. One student summed up the problem by saying, "When I had a problem on the weekend, the instructor would not reply to my email until the next week. The instructor communication was probably the thing that most hindered my success in this course."

Inadequate instructional feedback. The second category of barriers was inadequate instructional support. It appears that students felt lost out in the space of online education and did not feel as if they could were getting adequate feedback on their work so that they could enhance and improve. In addition to not receiving personal responses to their many requests about the course and issues within it in general, many unsuccessful students cited a lack of interaction and communication in the instructional realm as being limited or non-existent. Comments about this issue ranged from, "Not enough feedback on tests," "little interaction about material" to "No feedback on assignments..." and "No updates or comments on work." Students felt "little interaction about material" led to not being able to judge their progress adequately. As one student said that the teacher "does not grade for a long time after completion of quizzes. Said others, "there is little interaction about the material." This made students uneasy and

feeling as if they were lost. As one of them wrote, “You do not know how you are doing until it is too late.”

Unsuccessful Students’ Perceived Barriers to Success

After analyzing the quantitative responses to the *Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey* and comments from the Survey and Discussion Board Forum, the researcher identified unsuccessful online students to interview to discuss reasons they felt they were unsuccessful. All of the students chosen for this study were successful in traditional courses, but unsuccessful in online courses (students earning an F in the course or withdrawing from the course). The population sample for the interviews were identified to be interviewed based on their academic records assessed through the Institutional Research Department at Southeast Community College. Students were selected based on their enrollment in an online course and their failure to complete the course successfully. These students were analyzed and were found to have enrolled in a face-to-face course after their failure of the similar online course. Forty-six students were sent letters asking them to participate in this study.

During the interview process three themes emerged from the analysis and were identified as Instructional Strategies, Personal Issues, and Technologies. Each of these had categories within them. They are described in detail in the sections that follow. The level of response had to be 10% or higher. Table 8 describes the number of times each theme was noted during the interview process.

Table 8

Unsuccessful Student Perceptions of Barriers to Success

Theme	Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Personal Issues (Learning Style and Lifestyle)	10	55%
Instructional Strategies	5	27%
Technology	4	23%

N = 18

Personal Issues

Personal issues was the most often noted problem for unsuccessful students. This theme had two categories: personal learning style and lifestyle. Of the 18 students interviewed 10 students or 55% contributed personal issues as a barrier to their success.

Personal learning style. Each student comes to an online class with certain learning experiences, expectations and needs that have to be addressed, and to which instructors need to be sensitive, to maximize the students’ learning experiences. Every individual has a unique learning style, the “personal qualities that influence [the] ability to acquire information, to interact with peers . . . and to otherwise participate in learning experiences” (Grasha, 1996). Some people learn actively and interactively, others focus on facts, some prefer visual forms of information, and some learn from written and spoken explanations (Felder, 1996). Therefore, any course of study will have students with various learning styles, backgrounds, and levels of preparedness (Kramer-Koehler, Tooney, & Beke, 1995), which influence their engagements with learning environments (Sheard & Lynch, 2003). In online classes, most students are attracted by

the convenience and flexibility of scheduling (Ryan, 2001). However, the students' learning characteristics are unknown, making it difficult to design effective instruction.

Participants in this study noted personal learning styles as a hindrance to success. One student commented, "I am one of those people who can sit face-to-face and tell you everything I've learned, but when it comes to timed tests, I stress out more than I should and don't do as well as I could. I think I could have been more successful if I had more time to devote to each of my classes." Another student stated, "I am not a fan of non-traditional learning. I have to do more work to pass an online class than I do if I go into a face-to-face class and just listen to the instructor." "I lacked motivation. I am kind of a procrastinator. I work better under pressure, but sometimes I end up not completing a task because I wait until the last minute."

One student felt, "Classroom interaction is much more beneficial to learning. I learn better when I can form a study group with the people in the course with me. We can help each other understand what the teacher is talking about." One student felt she was unsuccessful because, "The course content (mathematics) is "difficult subject" to take online. I need to see the problem worked on the board, instead of me just sitting down by myself and trying to do the homework."

Lifestyle. First-generation students, immigrants and nontraditional students often make up the population of community colleges. Many community college students have special challenges, said Kay M. McClenney, Director of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. They may not have any family or friends who have ever attended college. Students come to college committed to graduating, but "one of the first things anybody will tell you is that life intervenes," Dr. McClenney said.

The survey at 22 community colleges provided a look at some of the distractions and challenges students faced: 47 percent reported working 20 hours or more per week, 10 percent were married, 25 percent had children living with them, and 25 percent said they were not native English speakers. Lifestyle issues seemed to be at the forefront of the minds of many online students at Southeast Community College as reasons that contributed to them being unsuccessful in online courses. One student stated, “Distractions. For me to be studying till late at night and not be able to rest properly.” Scheduling was also an issue said another, “I signed up for too many courses and had to cut down on my course load. I had personal problems.” One student said, “I couldn’t handle combined study plus work or family responsibilities.” While another student felt, “I had a set time to be somewhere, with the online course there was always a reason why I couldn’t sit down to do the work.” One student stated,

It (taking an online course) was the only way to go back to school. I work a 40 hour a week job, I have 2 teens, and I have a side business, but I was halfway there; only needed 12 more classes and wanted to do this thing. Two weeks after school started I found out my 18 year old was pregnant and miscarried. It was very stressful. I probably didn’t do as well on my first test because I wasn’t really focused on school.

Instructional Strategies

The second most mentioned barrier to success were the instructional strategies employed. These fell into two primary categories: the way in which instruction was delivered and the way in which instruction was organized. Of the 18 students interviewed, 5 students or 27% contributed problems with instructional strategies to be a barrier to their success.

Delivery. The first theme the researcher found during the analysis dealt primarily with the delivery of instructional content. The issues within this category dealt with the lack of

effective teaching and learning strategies. Another factor in the delivery area was the fact students' believe that the teacher did not use enough variety. Online students felt that the delivery of the online content was a direct result of the instructors' teaching style. One student stated, "I didn't like the instructor's teaching style." One issue that was mentioned by more than one student was the importance of visual aids such as PowerPoint in the delivery of online content. The student said, "The instructor had power point presentations with no lecture notes." Respondents generally agreed that online courses depend to a large extent on instructors' ability to teach them. Unfortunately, they reported that the instructors' limited technological training and online delivery skills impeded their teaching. Some respondents suggested that the successful implementation of online courses requires adequate professional development of instructors in online teaching techniques.

Organization. The second category within Instructional Strategies was organization. Students viewed the course as lacking adequate organization, which hindered their ability to grasp the material and succeed in learning. For example, one student stated, "I do not like Canvas, it is very difficult to use. I can't find any of my notes, the stuff I am looking for never seemed to be available." (Instructor did not organize course well or know when something wasn't published)." "If you can get face-to-face [they] are good...a kick-off one [meeting] I think is very helpful...it puts faces to people." Many students commented that they had a difficult time locating files or assignments in their online course. One student stated, "It was so hard because it seemed like I was always clicking and clicking. For example, when my instructor created the course she put everything in files. When I click on files, there are hundreds there so I have to search for the notes she was referring to. Another student had a difficult time with the fact the instructor did not organize the course by weeks. "Each week the assignment

had a different due date. It was really hard to plan what I needed to do when because I never knew when an assignment would be due.”

Technology

The third and final barrier students felt contributed to becoming an unsuccessful online student was technology. This barrier was unique to unsuccessful online students because the general population of online students did not identify technology as a barrier to success. Four of the 18 students interviewed identify technology as a barrier. This number of students was representative of 22% of the unsuccessful student population. Many research studies have been conducted on how to best facilitate the building of skills and comfort, but this issue remains a challenge for instructors and learners. Technical problems have long created challenges with the use of technology for learning.

Several students stated there were so many technical issues... “That it seemed to take up the whole focus and the instructor really didn’t know what to do to fix them.” Another student felt that the numerous technological problems in her online course took up too much of the class she had in one semester. She stated that there were “so many technical issues...that it seemed to take up the whole focus and the instructor really didn’t know how to help. One student stated, “If I asked a question about why a page wasn’t loading my instructor had no idea how to help me. I think instructors should have a basic knowledge of how the system works. I experienced too many technical difficulties.”

Technology use in online courses can strengthen or hinder the overall success of the student and the instructor. In this study, students found that they could contribute their own issues, as well as school issues with technology, hindered their success.

Student issues. The first category within technology was related to the student's personal issues with technology. Several students commented on the lack of technology that inhibited their success. Several students commented on their technology equipment. The students stated that they did not have updated computers or equipment necessary to complete the assignments. One participant commented, "Get a newer computer with more updated software!! My laptop is 5 years old and needs additional hardware components." Several students commented that they really were not proficient in the use of technology and requested such assistance as video technology tutorials. For instance, one student recommended a series of videos for training on various software and web applications used in the online courses. Issues with technology were also noted as, "Do not have internet at home..." "unfamiliarity with the Canvas site." Another student shared that she was learning on a tablet. In addition, some students were using several different computers that seemed to cause a problem due to the specifications and capabilities being different on the two computers."

School issue. During this study, the researcher found many students issues stemmed from online courses' inability to accommodate students who may need the kind of help offered in traditional courses. The study found many students are failing simply because the online course environment does not offer anything close to the support provided in a face-to-face course. To succeed, many students need to remain engaged in the course and need the ability to directly communicate with their instructor and other students. Several students blamed the school for issues contributing to being unsuccessful. One student commented, "I failed the course because I was unable to schedule a proctored exam. The whole proctored exam process is a nightmare at Southeast Community College." Another blamed the school for selecting an inappropriate software program. She wrote:

I also took CIS146 when it was “SAM” and my daughter took it when it was “SNAP”. BOTH of these programs are horrible. I do not know HOW much worse one is than the other, but SAM was REALLY, and I do mean REALLY, bad. I even thought at one time in that class how sad it was that obviously no one checked out that software before allowing it to be used in a classroom setting! Our entire class was in an uproar over it! It was extremely frustrating to turn in an assignment and have software continuously tell you there were errors when there plainly weren’t. It was also so slow to load between questions, etc. and I know it was the software and not my computer because I didn’t have problems like that with anything else. I know SNAP is bad too and well, forgive me for saying this, but you asked: It is just not right for an educational institution to require students to use such sub-standard software.

One student shared, “I experienced too many technical difficulties with the CIS program I was trying to use. Courses should not require external software in addition to Canvas. It is confusing to go between 2 systems.” Another issue a student experienced was, “This is the first time that I have taken an online class using Canvas (SPH106) and I have to say that the experience has not been great. We have had two tests so far that have been graded incorrectly in the software’s testing structure and the instructor has stated that he is having trouble with the communication piece to and from students.”

Strategies for Improving Online Instruction

The last research question dealt with student’s perceptions of ways in which their online learning could be improved. Responses from the third question on the survey, “What are ways we can improve the overall online learning experience at Southeast Community College,” and responses to the interview were used to address this question. Student comments from *Student*

Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Survey, Discussion Board and Interviews fell within two categories: instructor training and student support. Of the 88 students who responded to all three data collection instruments, Instructor Training was found to be the most important need for improvement for Southeast Community College.

Table 9

Strategies for Improving Online Learning

	Items for Improvement					
	Student Evaluations	%	Discussion Board	%	Interview	%
	(46)		(24)		(18)	
Instructor Training	24	52%	14	58%	10	55%
Student Support	22	47%	10	41%	8	44%

N = 88 student responses

Instructor Training

The highest number and percentage of comments on improvements were related to instructor training. During the analysis of the Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor the researcher found 24 of 46 students offered suggestions that related to improvements needed to instructional strategies to include instructor training. Responses included, “It would have really helped if I would have been able to hear the instructor speak during his face to face courses or if he had voice over on the PowerPoints. I didn’t feel like the course was designed very well. I was always looking for assignments and notes.” Another

student mentioned that I felt like it was mainly a self-taught course. “It would have been better if the instructor engaged more with the students.”

When analyzing the participant’s responses to the Discussion Board, the researcher found that 14 of the student responses related to improvements needed to instructional strategies that included specific needs regarding instructor training. For example, one student commented, “I felt so disconnected from the other students in the course. It would have been helpful if the instructor would have had more discussion opportunities or had assigned assignments that we could work on as a group.” Another student mentioned the need for instructors to master technology before the course begins. “The instructor planned a few live study sessions for us, but technology failed each time and the instructor was not able to get the web conference started.”

Of the 18 students interviewed, 10 student responses were related to faculty training. Suggestions were expressed regarding training instructors to be more knowledgeable, helpful and timely in responding to students. Examples of typical, statements made by students are: “He needs to better organize the course and give students more time to complete the assignments. . .”, “. . . This instructor needs to learn how to teach better,” was expanded to include a suggestion that instructors learn better ways to organize content to meet the needs of all learning styles. One student suggested a more uniform design is needed in online courses. She stated, “It would have really helped me if there was a standard online syllabus and course outline at Southeast Community College. Each course I have taken online seems to be designed in a different way. It would help if there more consistency and I would know where to look and what I am looking for.” Another student commented, “The class was very non interactive. Unless you asked for it, not information was provided by the teacher. Even then, some info wasn't addressed.”

Student Support

In addition to improving instructor training, several students felt student support was also an area that could use improvements. When analyzing the Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor the researcher found 22 of the 46 students responded with a suggestion that supported the need for improvement to student support services. Most comments made by students with personal issues pointed to ways student support services could be improved. Examples of statements were: “It would be nice to have a place to go on campus where students can get help with technology or the online work....” “There needs to be a place you can take your computer on campus to get help with technical problems.” These student comments led to a discussion that supports a need for a tutoring center on campus to support online students.

Of the participants’ responses to the Discussion Board Forum, 10 of 24 students found it would be helpful if student support was strengthened. One student commented, “It would have been helpful to me if the college offered a better orientation to online learning. I was a returning student who had not been in college in many years, the first semester was rough for me because I didn’t know how to do anything online. My instructor was helpful, but I feel that the college could have done more to create a better online orientation for me. Either a seminar or course.” Another student felt that there wasn’t any real support for students who had never taken an online course. He said, “I felt like everyone knew so much more than I did about how to navigate the course. The whole time it seemed as if I was having to teach myself how to use the course as well as the content for the course.”

During the interview phase, the researcher found 8 of the 18 students interviewed stated that student support should be strengthened at Southeast Community College. Several students commented that the institution did not help them with personal issues that arose during the phase

of their online learning experience. One student commented, “I feel as if the online environment at Southeast Community College is completely separated from the college. There was no way to communicate with a counselor when my daughter tried to commit suicide. It would have helped if I would have been able to communicate with a clinical professional at the college that could help me discuss my issues with my instructor.” One student stated, “I know I am terrible at time management, if there had been a computer lab opened at least one night a week, I would have been more successful in my course. I could have set aside time to actually come to campus to get my work done.”

Another student commented the Website of Southeast Community College should really be more user-friendly. Many of the questions and issues that I had in my online course could have been avoided if I had access to a help page that showed me the specific requirements I needed on my computer.” Another participant noted that it was very difficult to receive an answer from technical support. I would send an email or call and it was days before a reply was returned. I wish there had been a place I could take my computer on campus to show tech support what my problem was.”

Differences between General population of online students and Unsuccessful Students

There were similarities and differences between the way in which successful and unsuccessful students perceived barriers to their success in online learning. Table 10 presents these differences.

Table 10

Comparison Table for Perceived Barriers to Success in Percentages

Theme	General population of online students (70)		Unsuccessful Student Population (18)	
	Number of Students	Percentage of Students	Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Instructional Strategies	40	57%	5	28%
Interaction and Communication	10	14%	2*	2%*
Personal Issues	20	29%	10	55%
Technology	2 *	2%*	4	22%

N = 88 = Total Number of Students, N = 70 participants of survey and DB, N = 18 interview participants

* not identified as a theme for this group

There were similarities and differences in the way in which the general population of online students and students who were successful in traditional classes, but unsuccessful in online classes viewed barriers to their success. While both groups perceived instructional strategies as hindering their success, over 50% of the general population of online students (57%) saw this as a difficulty while less than 30 % of the unsuccessful students (28%) viewed it as a barrier to their learning success. Similarly, while both groups viewed personal issues as a problem, fifty-five percent of unsuccessful students identified this factor while only 29% of the

other group did so. So few of the general population of online students viewed technology as interfering with their learning that it was not classified as a factor. Yet, 22% of those students who had failed their online learning class indicated that technology played a role in their difficulties. While a small group of the general student population (14%) viewed teacher interaction and communication as an issue, only 2% of unsuccessful students mentioned this as a problem so it was not identified as a theme with this group.

Demographic Differences

The researcher conducted an in-depth analysis of differences between gender, age, and ethnicity of participants. Table 11 lists the students by age, gender and ethnicity.

Table 11

Participant Age, Gender and Ethnicity

	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
1	49	F	W
2	54	F	A
3	48	F	W
4	22	F	B
5	30	M	W
6	37	F	H
7	48	F	W
8	28	F	B
9	19	F	W
10	19	M	W

Table 11 (continued)

	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
11	34	F	A
12	58	M	W
13	22	M	B
14	20	F	W
15	30	F	H
16	28	F	W
17	48	F	B
18	29	F	W

The researcher chose to analyze a group of 18 students to gain insights into whether there were patterns or themes based on gender, ethnicity, and age. The group consisted of 14 women and 4 men. Since the numbers for some of the groups are so small, the findings must be considered with caution. However, it appears that personal problems were very prominent for those in the 50 and above range as 100% of them identified this as a problem. While only one person in the 40–49 (25%) age group identified this as a problem, a little more than half of those in the other two groups viewed this as a problem. Tables 12, 13, and 14 show the number of responses based on gender, age, and ethnicity.

Table 12

Gender Responses by Percent

Themes	Male	%	Female	%
	(N=4)		(N=14)	
Personal Issues	0	0%	6	42%
Instructional Strategies	3	75%	2	14%
Technology	0	0%	3	21%
Interaction and Communication	1	25%	1	7%

Table 13

Age Responses by Percent

Themes	19-24	%	25-39	%	40-49	%	Over 50	%
	(5)		(7)		(4)		(2)	
Personal Issues	3	60%	4	57%	1	25%	2	100%
Instructional Strategies	3	60%	2	28%	0	0	0	0
Technology	0	0	0	0	2	50%	2	100%
Interaction and Communication	0	0	0	0	2	50%	0	0

Table 14

Ethnicity Responses by Percent

Themes	White	%	Black	%	Asian	%	Hispanic	%
	(12)		(4)		(1)		(2)	
Personal Issues	6	50%	3	75%	1	100%	0	0
Instructional Strategies	3	25%	2	50%	0	0	0	0
Technology	2	16%	1	25%	0	0	1	50%
Interaction and Communication	1	8%	0		0		1	50%

While 100% of those over 50 saw technology as a major problem and 50% of those 40–49 viewed this as an issue, none of the other students viewed this as an issue. Women had more difficulties with this issue than men. Sixty percent of the students in the 19–24 age range viewed instructional strategies as a problem, but only 28% of those in the 25–39% range did and older students did not view this as a problem. Interestingly 75% of males contributed instructional strategies to barriers to their success, but only 14% of women agreed. Although the Hispanic students in the group did not view personal issues as a problem, over 50% of all other groups did. Finally, all age groups viewed personal issues as a problem but the oldest group saw it as less important than the other age groups.

Summary

This chapter included a presentation of findings that were drawn from the data analysis as previously discussed. Profiles were developed to allow readers a characterization of the research participants who chose to take part in this study. The data analysis procedures were discussed

and the emergence of themes was illustrated in narrative as well as visual displays. Finally, the conclusions and verification process was presented to affirm the given results. A summary of the findings, conclusions, implications and recommendations are presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Purpose of the Study

Since research on online learning for students who attend community colleges is limited, this study investigated the issue by evaluating perceptions of community college students at a rural community college in southeast Alabama. The study presented the student views of issues that prevent student success in online courses. It also focused on challenges related to student retention and proposed instructional approaches. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are community college students overall perceptions of the quality and value of their online distance education courses?
2. What do community college students view as the primary barriers to their success in online learning?
3. What barriers do community college students who are unsuccessful in online learning perceive as being barriers to their success?
4. What do students recommend as strategies for improving online instruction?
5. In what ways, if any, do unsuccessful student perceptions of barriers to online learning differ from those of the general population of online students?
6. To what extent are student differences in these perceptions based on gender, age group, and ethnicity?

This chapter discusses the findings and their implications for practice. It also includes recommendations for future research to enhance knowledge about online education in community college settings.

Discussion of Key Findings

This section presents an overview of the key findings. It begins with a discussion of the primary reasons for a lack of success for the General Population of Online Students. This is followed by an overview of possible reasons for differences between the general population of online students and those students who have been unsuccessful in online learning. The last part of the discussion deals with issues related to gender, age, and ethnicity.

Primary Reasons for a Lack of Success for All Students

The quantitative data indicated that most students were satisfied with the overall quality of their online learning experiences and that the area of greatest dissatisfaction was the interaction between the student and the faculty member. However, the qualitative data analysis reflected different perceptions. These findings indicated that the organization and delivery of instruction was the primary difficulty for students and that personal issues and technology had a major impact on students who were unsuccessful in online learning endeavors. Interaction was a problem for some students, but was not noted by those who were unsuccessful as being of importance. Technology was also discovered as a major issue for students who had difficulty succeeding in their online learning courses.

The difference in these findings point to the importance of institutions using a wide variety of measures to investigate and understand student learning, success, and failure. Quantitative surveys are important and they give valuable feedback, but the findings of this study indicate that institutions should consider periodic student interviews or focus groups, particularly

for students who are not succeeding, in order to understand the depth and complexity of the issues they face so that institutions can assure that they are supporting their students and addressing their needs and that they can provide the kind of feedback that faculty need to provide high quality instruction in online environment.

Instructional Strategies

The general population of online students of online students felt course delivery and organization was the most important factor in their lack of success. Unsuccessful students also noted this factor as being a problem for them. This finding demonstrates the importance of the administrative duty to train experienced online learning instructors and calls for their periodic review to determine if they meet desired delivery criteria. A continual review of activity and quality of interaction should be conducted by the online learning administration. This review should be accomplished periodically during each term. A relationship should be drawn between the evaluation of online courses and instructors and those courses in which students continue to be unsuccessful. The importance of high quality instruction and instructor assessment in online delivery is consistent with research by Johnson and McAllister (2011).

Personal Issues

Although unsuccessful students indicated that personal issues were of greater significance to them than the general population of online students, this area appears to impact student success and failure. Many online students are taking online classes because they cannot take classes during the times institutions offer them; family, work, and medical considerations often play a large part in deciding to take an online course. Students who are silent in face-to-face classes often go to an extreme in an online-education course: they clam up all together or they finally uncork, usually toward the end of the semester when they notice their grade is being

affected. Students in online-education classes, especially online students, sometimes assume that the professor will contact them if there is anything wrong, and so they go along reading lectures and doing work, without ever contacting their classmates or instructor with questions or issues. Students in this study struggled with personal issues that ranged from needing more explanation on how to complete problems and stating he/she learns better with a variety of audio and visual instruction. This finding supports research by Schuh (2005).

Interaction and Communication

Although the students who were unsuccessful in online learning did not indicate that faculty interaction and communication was a problem for them, there was a lower level of student satisfaction with the provision of timely feedback in the online learning environment reported on the survey and in comments by the general population of online students. Though this is a single item, it is worthy of attention. Online learning researchers and writers have consistently reinforced the need for well-prepared instructors to be trained in appropriate delivery strategies. These instructors, by the structure they provide and the attention with which they meet the needs of students at an online, are keys to the success of the online learning program. Appropriate professional development and support, both technologically and administratively, should assist the instructors in using appropriate teaching strategies for their content and their students (Mandernach, 2005).

Primary Recommendations for Improvement

Students participating in online classes suggested numerous factors were to blame for their lack of success including, instructional strategies, personal issue, technology and interaction with the instructor, and technology. They also presented ideas for improving online learning. This section presents implications and recommendations for practice based on these findings.

Personal Issues

The most common reason unsuccessful online students felt that they were unsuccessful was due to personal issues. All of these elements should be dealt with by the school administration and faculty. To help students manage personal issues in online courses, an online facilitator/instructor needs to enliven the course and provide motivation whenever possible while giving the students tips to aid them in maintaining a positive work ethic. The institution should offer a tutoring center for online students complete with seminars on time management, study skills, and how to stay motivated in an online course. Also in this tutoring center students would be able to seek technical assistance and additional instruction on course content. Another suggestion would be to offer a seminar about how to help online students succeed. During this seminar, a trained professional could discuss with faculty about the importance of supporting online students during office hours.

In addition to providing this type of support, faculty should be encouraged to be available to all of their students during their office hours. When a faculty member is planning to meet with the student, they should be sure to have plenty of time and not be disturbed by others. They should also consider engaging in online conversations through such avenues as Skype or Facetime, since many students may not be able to come to campus to meet personally.

Though faculty are not trained counselors or therapists, they may be the only person willing to make the time for personal communication with this student. Of all the professional techniques used by mental health professionals, there is none more important than knowing how to listen; not just hear but understand what this student is saying. If faculty would be willing to step out of the role as professor, teacher, or advisor for a moment and become instead a “learner,” they may rather quickly gain admittance to the world of pain, confusion, or stress in

which this student is living. Their willingness to listen is the cornerstone of a trusting relationship. Trust may not develop under every circumstance, but if it does, it will be because the instructor gave that student time and space in their life: they listened to him without interruption; they listened to her feelings without judgment; they listened to his thoughts without correcting them; they listened to her just as she is and not as she “ought” to be. Although instructors may not be able to take away personal issues online students are facing sometimes the student only need someone to recognize and listen to the issue.

The recommendations for practice, in accordance with the findings of the study, have implications that suggest that the college student population also needs the provision of academic support and tutorial learning plays an instrumental role in today’s academic environment. With 55% of unsuccessful students concluded that personal issues were their barriers to success it is imperative that Southeast Community College offer a center of academic excellence with staff members on hand to help students manage personal issues that may arise while they are enrolled in an online course. One example worthy of consideration is the development of an online computer lab or online tutoring lab that supports learner feedback and provides a location for students to seek help when issues arise in the online environment. Also in this tutoring center students would be able to seek technical assistance and additional instruction on course content. It is important that the institution also employ an alert system that notifies students and advisors when they are failing. The institution should work to improve counseling and crisis services to online students. Students should be aware there are mechanisms in place to help them cope with personal tragedies. It is also important that the institution note the differences in each age groups’ perceptions of their barriers to success. More options should be made available to help the 100% of students over 50 overcome their technology barriers. Another option for students to

help them overcome personal barrier might be the integration of peer groups to offer a support system for students with personal issues.

Instructional Strategies

Instructional quality was another area that students noted as a difficulty for them. One specific suggestion to improve instructional quality might be to initiate a mentoring program that matches experienced online learning instructors with novices. In such a mentoring program, the novice would be required to shadow the experienced instructor for at least one complete term to observe delivery and interaction techniques. After completing an observation period, the novice could be assigned to a class section as the primary instructor and the experienced instructor would provide support throughout the term and assist the novice in refining delivery techniques. The experienced instructor would recommend to the administration certification of the novice as qualified to instruct online or that the novice continue in schooling for an additional term.

Organized professional development should be offered each month to provide improved delivery techniques and familiarization with changes to software in the course management system. Representatives of the institution should attend online learning conferences and seminars to stay up-to-date of technological changes and network with others in the online learning community. Instructors should be provided with ways to better reach their male population of which 75% felt that instructional strategies were the main barrier to their success. Being aware of the potential for technological improvements and recommending changes in the delivery system are important to staying at or near the forefront of online learning and ensuring a high level of student satisfaction.

Indeed, it is important to minimize the issues as much as possible from the beginning of the learning experience. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, including providing

overviews of the tools used for the course and/or hands-on workshops with the technology that will be used in the online learning experience. It is also equally important to help learners understand that problems are going to occur—and most likely at the most inconvenient time (Hill, 2002). Facilitators can help ease the stress by letting learners know at the beginning of the course that they understand problems will occur. Learners can help ease their own stress by recognizing that problems can occur and making back-up plans and back-up copies to help facilitate their work.

When designing courses, it is beneficial for instructors to know what hurdles students encounter. Each course should be evaluated by students each semester to identify ways to continue to improve the course. Therefore, before the next course the instructor can possibly address those issues and eliminate any future problems to ensure effective learning. It is important for the institution to carefully examine student grades and feedback for all online classes and assure that faculty are organizing course work properly and giving feedback in a timely manner. When the administration sees that a faculty member is consistently receiving negative feedback and/or that a higher percentage of students are failing or doing poorly in their courses, the faculty member should be contacted and appropriate professional development or other support mechanisms should be put into place.

Quality online courses are well-organized and easy to navigate. An easy way to organize course units or modules is by using folders. Each folder can be labeled with the name of the unit and the dates of completion for all work within the unit. Folders should include all reading assignments, lecture materials, supporting websites or activities, links to discussion board threads, etc. for the unit represented by the folder. This practice helps students easily locate all the materials and complete all the tasks for a given unit. It is also vital that instructors remember

that good online pedagogy begin with good pedagogy, period. Online or not, instructors should abide by techniques and concepts of teaching and learning that transcend the method of delivery. A review of best practices in online education supports the notion that good classroom techniques, such as collaboration and Page 3 employment of multiple modalities, “also appear to work in online education” (Smith, 2006). Faculty should be made aware of these strategies and provided assistance in implementing their use when required.

Instructors who are new to the online learning environment need to be prepared to deliver and interact with students through the course. In order to properly prepare instructors, the institution should give consideration to the development of an expanded professional development program that assists new online learning instructors in the art of electronic delivery and interaction. One improvement to development of better instructional strategies at Southeast Alabama Community College would be to offer an introductory program that requires completion of a formal online tutorial. This program should have a more comprehensive approach in order to further enhance instructor preparedness and ensure a high level of student satisfaction.

Technology

One way to understand the technology needs of students and instructors would be to gather input of faculty that provides a basis for the development of the readiness assessment instrument. Faculty across the campus would be asked to submit questions to the investigator that would measure the level of information technology skills needed by students entering their respective classes. Questions could be chosen for the assessment that include such topics as opening, saving and renaming files, printing documents, sending and retrieving email, and downloading documents. A multiple-choice format should be used for the assessment to allow

students an opportunity to use the technique of elimination to determine the most appropriate answer. Upon completion of the assessment, all students would be made aware of their scores by the automated system. Students would be advised that those whose scores fell below the 75th percentile would be contacted by a representative of the college regarding available remediation opportunities such as seminars and orientation courses.

Interaction and Communication

Although the students interviewed, who were unsuccessful, did not note this as a problem, some students in this study shared that instructors rarely or never responded to emails in a timely manner. Students need much more support and feedback in the online environment than in a traditional course. This is because the potential threat that students feel alienated is quite high in the Virtual Classroom. Using effective feedback strategies will enable the instructor to identify and meet individual student needs as well as encourage students to participate and continue to participate at a high quality level.

Attention should be devoted to improving administrative services to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of course delivery. The researcher found this finding to communicate the need for a periodic review of online courses. Currently Southeast Community College does not have any type of review in place. Presently students are not given the opportunity to analyze online course or instructor each semester. One way Southeast Community College could improve this issue is offer student evaluations at the end of each semester.

All of these issues related to instruction (delivery, organization, interaction, technology) indicate that learning instructors must be monitored in some meaningful way and calls for their periodic review to determine if they meet desired delivery criteria. A continual review of

activity and quality of interaction should be conducted by assigned faculty support staff within the Southeast Community College Online Learning administration. This review should be accomplished periodically during each 12-week term. The Student Evaluation of Online Course and Instructor Results should be collated for each class section at the end of every term and forwarded to the appropriate Program and Department Chair for review. This would provide academic oversight and assist the chair with annual reviews.

Comparisons between the General Population of Online Students and Unsuccessful Students' Perceptions

Personal issues. The most reported barrier for unsuccessful students were personal issues. The researcher found 55% of unsuccessful online students identified personal issues to be the main barrier to their success. In contrast, this finding was different from the general population of online students (57%) who reported Instructional Strategies to be the main barrier to their success. The general population of online students of students contributed only 29% of their issues to personal problems. However, this is almost 1/3rd of the students, meaning that this is an important student consideration.

The reason for this finding may have something to do with perceptions of online learning. Online learning can sound so wonderful that some students may start with an unrealistic vision. In reality, online courses require just as much, if not more, time and energy as traditional classroom courses. It also requires specific computer skills and learning strategies in order to succeed. Research has found that personal issues related to education arise at an early age. Less parental guidance and praise, less consistency of appropriate behavior (both social and academic), and lack of encouragement to perform well negatively influence a student's academic achievement (Singham, 2003). As a result, academic unpreparedness begins to take shape early

in a student's academic career. The emotionally under prepared tend to be those students who may have difficulties outside of the school setting, such as problems at home, alcohol or substance abuse, or for some, simply a lack of self-confidence. Students deal with a variety of personal issues but one major issue is being under prepared. Under prepared students are typically first generation college students who have no background knowledge about a college campus environment and how to be successful. Most obvious is the need to assist the student with study skills and academic tutoring, the significance of which goes beyond just passing a course. At the heart of such assistance is the academic and personal integration of the student into the college environment. Another recommendation would be to teach students how to control their interruptions and to better manage their time by waiting to take emails and text messages during their "online study time."

Instructional strategies. The general population of online students of online students reported instructional strategies to be the most important barrier to their success. While the unsuccessful students reported this to a somewhat lesser degree, the problem appears to be a significant factor in student success. Educators have a role in students' self-directed learning too, and that is to give the learner the responsibility of learning, expect success and be there. Online instructors should outline expectations for students thoroughly, by articulating expectations and the role of the student in the course, the student is given the responsibility. Instructors should be sure to expect questions in the first two weeks of the course.

As noted previously, the research indicated that this is an important issue and cannot receive enough emphasis. The importance of high quality instruction, no matter what the setting, whether a traditional, blended, or online learning environment, makes this findings something that would be expected.

Interaction and Communication

A small percent of the general population of online students of students (14%) and only 2 students in the unsuccessful group found interaction and communication to be a barrier.

Constant communication is an important element in online learning. It is important that instructors don't expect students to know how to be self-directed, they may need to develop this skill set. It is surprising that the students who were unsuccessful did not view this as a problem, while a small percentage of the larger group did. It may be that the unsuccessful students were so overwhelmed by their own personal problems, that they did not view interaction with the faculty member as an issue. It might also be that they did not seek out interaction with the faculty member as often as the general population of online students. Additionally, although it is important to remind faculty to be connected with and communicate regularly with their students, it appears that for the most part, instructors are fulfilling this obligation.

Technology

Technology was cited as an important barrier for unsuccessful online students, but was not identified as an issue within the general population of online students. It is important that institutions prepare students for the technology requirements they will need to be successful in an online course. It is important to note there was a difference between successful and unsuccessful student's perceptions of the role of technology as a barrier. The reason for the differences is not known and bears further research.

The feedback from unsuccessful students that technology was a barrier to their success indicates that basic technology and computer skills are needed before enrolling in an online course. Some of those students mentioned specific information such as adding attachments, scanning documents, sending emails, and word processing. Other students believed the

technology level needs to be higher stating that you must have knowledge in discussion posts, video and audio production, online chats, and podcasting.

Furthermore, several students noted that you must understand and be familiar with the program software of the course (e.g., Canvas). While the students explained the necessary skills needed for the online course, one stated, “The course must be made very user friendly by the instructor.” These findings were consistent with a study conducted by Dr. Hendricks and Dr. Bailey at Austin State University (Hendricks, 2014).

Comparisons based on Demographic Differences

Nontraditional adult students in higher education cannot be considered a uniform group. The life course — education, work, retirement — is increasingly rare as people change jobs, retrain voluntarily or involuntarily, and enter the workforce at various times. In addition, the changing workplace, by now a familiar listing of economic, demographic, organizational, and social changes has created the need to develop life-long learning programs that meet the needs of learners in a complex pattern of contexts. There were demographic differences in the findings that are being presented in his discussion. Findings related to these issues should be examined with caution, as the number (n) for some groups is quite small. However, findings related to differences in perceptions by demographics yielded some interesting outcomes which should be examined more thoroughly in future studies.

Personal issues. Female participants in this study seemed to have more personal issues than their male counterparts. Many community college students have children, spouses, and possibly even parents they feel sole responsibility for. While men tend to be more often monetarily responsibility women are more often the gender most dealing with personal issues that arise in their homes These predominately female students experience both institutional and

personal barriers that make their ability to learn and to complete their education more difficult (Glass & Rose, 1994).

Institutional barriers may include time limits on obtaining a degree, lack of counseling services, few support groups, and limited childcare service. One of the most frequently cited reasons for returning to school is divorce (Glass & Rose, 1994). Personal barriers include financial insufficiency, conflicts between home and school roles, lack of time, insecurity, and problems of identity resulting from divorce (Lieberman & Vaughn, 1990; Marlow, 1989). The average single-mother student has two children, receives little or no child support, is working part-time, or is receiving Federal Financial Aid as her main source of income (Brown, 2002). Although her decision to return to school is a positive one, her life is held together by the threads of available childcare, dependable transportation, and access to health care. Any break in these sources of support threatens her success in the classroom. Women are often eligible for assistance in the form of a workforce development grant to help offset expense. A better partnership could be established between the local career center's Workforce Investment Act (WIA) representatives and potential students. The federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which superseded the Job Training Partnership Act, offers a comprehensive range of workforce development activities through statewide and local organizations. Available workforce development activities provided in local communities can benefit job seekers, laid off workers, youth, incumbent workers, new entrants to the workforce, veterans, persons with disabilities, and employers.

The purpose of these activities is to promote an increase in the employment, job retention, earnings, and occupational skills improvement by participants. This, in turn, improves the quality of the workforce, reduces welfare dependency, and improves the productivity and

competitiveness of the nation. California will receive approximately \$454 million from the federal government this year to provide services for adults, laid-off workers, and youth.

Southeast Community College should seek opportunities for more student grants and financial aid literacy for these non-traditional students. Also, the institution once had a thriving child development center on campus, but this center was closed due to lack of grant funding. Administration should seek other avenues to fund the child development center to help ease the burden of childcare for the students of Southeast Community College.

Southeast Community College could help ease this burden for women would be by offering counseling services to online students. The institution should also look at strengthening the advising process to ensure online students have a face and a name of an instructor help them overcome or direct them to someone who can help them overcome any academic or personal issues that might arise.

While the population was too small to understand the ethnic differences of this population, more students in the 25–39 age range reported personal issues as barrier to their success. The differences in ethnicity were so small that this element is not being addressed in the discussion. However, further research should be conducted on this issue.

Instructional strategies. Students in the 19–24 and 25–39 age range felt instructional strategies hinder their ability to be successful. This is interesting because the students age 40-49 and over 50 did not. During this study the researcher also found more males (75%) than females (14%) struggle with instructional strategies. A recent study published in Scientific American, which involved imaging the brains of nearly 1,000 adolescents, found that male brains had more connections within hemispheres, whereas female brains were more connected between hemispheres. The results, which apply to the population as a whole and not individuals, suggest

that male brains may be optimized for motor skills, and female brains may be optimized for combining analytical and intuitive thinking. This research conducted by Live Science explains the gender differences associated with instructional barriers in online courses.

In order to deal with this issue, Southeast Community College should encourage faculty members who teach in traditional and non-traditional adult student settings to develop inclusive learning environments that attend to this unique population. Methods that affect inclusiveness include surveying the nontraditional students in the classroom in order to develop learning activities and curricula that reflect the diversity of the group and developing a new pedagogical style that incorporates and/or draws upon the inclusive experience. Inclusiveness can be accomplished by emphasizing the following three steps: First, establish student/teacher interaction that reinforces the intercommunication among students. This “linking” process then facilitates the sharing of common life experiences pertinent to course material. Second, present course information in a contextual manner that allows for lessons to refer to the relationship between the learner and his or her knowledge base. This context includes issues relating to the following four domains: family, career, community, and environment. Recognizing that learning can be a transformative process is the third step and can be accomplished by emphasizing in the classroom such diverse practices as reflective journal writing, storytelling, role-playing, small group discussion, and metaphor analysis (Brown, 2002). The younger generations today are very dependent on technology and are accustomed to technology being integrated into every area of their life. Many times veteran lecture based college classrooms do not incorporate the types of technology these students use on a daily basis. The instructors should be encouraged to integrate more active learning techniques so the absence of technology does not become an issue.

Another recommendation would be for instructors to create and integrate a risk assessment of students in their courses. This assessment would allow instructors to check which students are communicating and checking their assignments and identify students who are at risk of failing. Other options might include allowing flexibility for late submissions to allow for any personal issues that might arise during the semester.

Technology. The non-traditional college students (40–49 and over 50) with 100% of students over 50 feeling that technology was the main barrier to their success. For adult learners who are now returning to the classroom after being absent from college classrooms that resembled lecture halls for many years, it is evident that times have changed and technology has taken over. Students now take notes on their iPads, type papers on their laptops, and access course textbooks online. Sometimes learning and adapting to the digital world we now live in can present an entirely new challenge to overcome for the General Population of Online Students. On top of balancing a family and full-time job while trying to keep up in their coursework, hardworking adult students (40–49 and over 50) must also learn the ins and outs of social media, smart phones, tablets, and how all of these things apply to the classroom. Technology can sometime be perplexing for older generations. For example, the outcomes from the study showed that the younger generations did not contribute problems with technology as a barrier to their success. Southeast Community College may want to assure that they offer opportunities for older people to have classes or workshops independently or pair them with younger students, such as peer tutors or mentors. The prospect of going back to college can be daunting for baby boomers. To ease the transition, the gerontology program at Portland Community College (PCC) in Oregon has launched a new peer mentoring program. It hires former and current students to provide coaching, tutoring, and mentoring to other older students

like themselves. As a result of the mentoring, more students have completed the program and more experienced adults have made successful transitions into the workforce. There were no differences in ethnicity of the participants.

Likewise women had more difficulty with this issue than men. Twenty-one percent of the women and none of the men stated technology was a barrier to their success. Previous studies have found behavioral differences between men and women regarding technology. For example, women may have better verbal memory and social cognition, whereas men may have better motor and spatial skills, on average.

Interaction and communication. Twenty-five percent of men and 7% of women chose interaction and communication as contributing factor to being unsuccessful in an online course. Improved faculty training, especially for faculty new to online teaching and learning, is another area that makes a significant impact. Perhaps the single most effective online classroom intervention for nontraditional students is to heighten the sense of the instructor's presence in the course. One way to accomplish this is through reexamining the role of faculty and providing ongoing faculty training. At the end of the day, all of this training is focused on enhancing faculty interaction and sense of presence in a course. As one student stated in the interview process: "My best instructors send e-mails, post frequent announcements, interact in the discussion boards, post video lectures, and grade in a timely manner. I want their time and attention, just like campus students. If the instructor talks to me often, I feel more comfortable asking for help when I need it." And that is the goal: for traditional and non-traditional male and female students from all ethnic groups to ask for help before they get too far down an unsuccessful path with little hope of finding their way back.

Conceptual Framework

In Chapter 1, the researcher noted that research findings from the literature combined with a review of the *Student Evaluation of Online Course* and *Interview Results* at Southeast Community College three themes have emerged as common factors contributing to student dropout rates: psychological, technological, and social factors. The original framework created by Bekele (2008) was reflective of the connection of each of the three barriers as noted by research. Figure 2 provides a visual of the original conceptual framework.

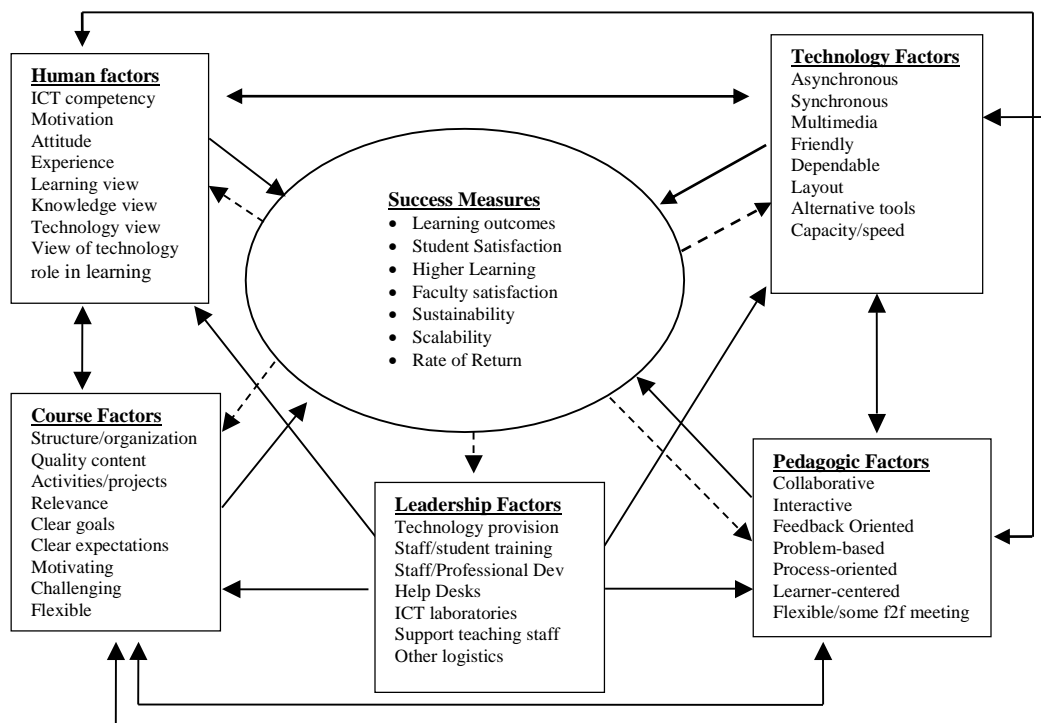


Figure 2. Factors Affecting Online Course Dropout

Within this framework, there existed a complex relationship among HF, TF, CF, and PF, including symbiotic relationships between HF and PF, HF and CF, HF and TF, CF and PF, and CF and TF. However, the focus of this study was limited to investigating only factors impacting unsuccessful online students. Thus, the relation of the success factors to success measures was

the interest. It was proposed that HF, TF, CF, would reflect the success factors in the Southeast Community College's Online Learning Program, which was examined using a qualitative research methodology.

Through this study, the researcher found differences among the general population of online students of students and the population of unsuccessful students at Southeast Community College. The general population of online students found Instructional Strategies to be the most identified barrier to success. On the other hand, unsuccessful students felt their own personal issues were the major barrier that contributed to success in online courses. Personal issues can encompass a wide variety of issues, including social factors that influence online course dropout involve the degree of the student's feelings, perceptions, and reactions to the online learning courses and environment. It appears that feeling that one is part of a learning community may be an important element in student success.

Figures 3 and 4 place the finding categories and themes within the structure created by Bekele. It uses the titles within that framework and places the barriers identified from this study, within that framework. This figure is provided to show the connection between the conceptual framework and the findings.

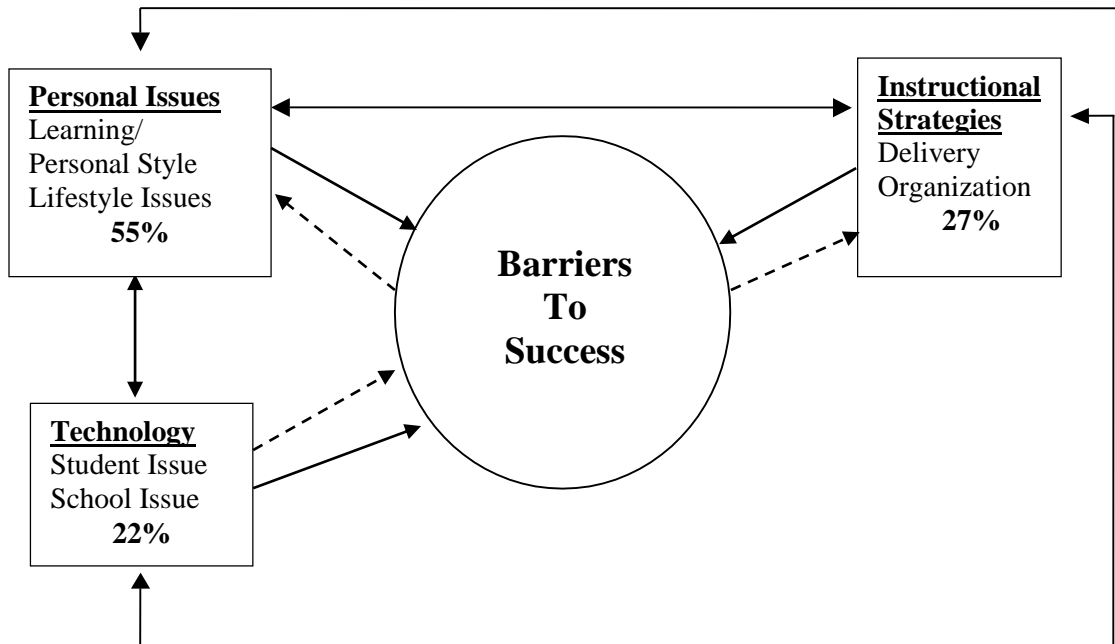


Figure 3. Modified Conceptual Framework for Barriers to Success in Online Learning General

Population of Online Students

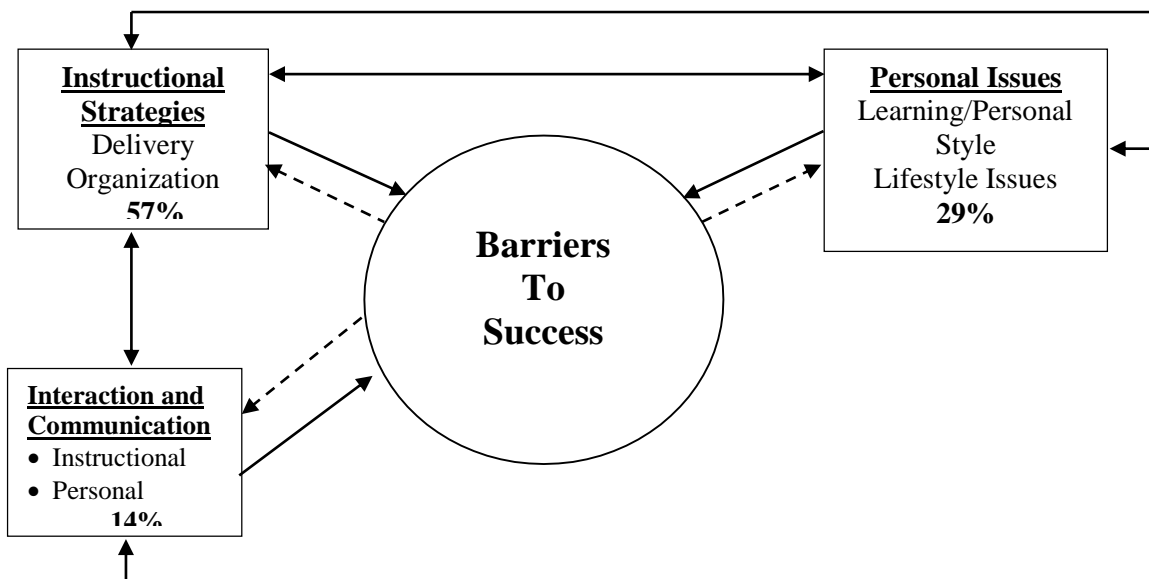


Figure 4. Modified Conceptual Framework for Barriers to Success in Online Learning

Unsuccessful Online Students

Figures 3 and 4 present conceptual frameworks which reflect the findings of this study as they unfolded, creating a new conceptual framework that focuses on the elements that appeared to be most important as barriers to success in this community college setting. It uses the same type of diagram created by Bekele to show that the elements are interrelated, but contains only those elements related to students' perceptions of the barriers they faced in online learning.

Demographic Differences

Figures 5 and 6 show the demographic difference related to barriers of success for unsuccessful online students.

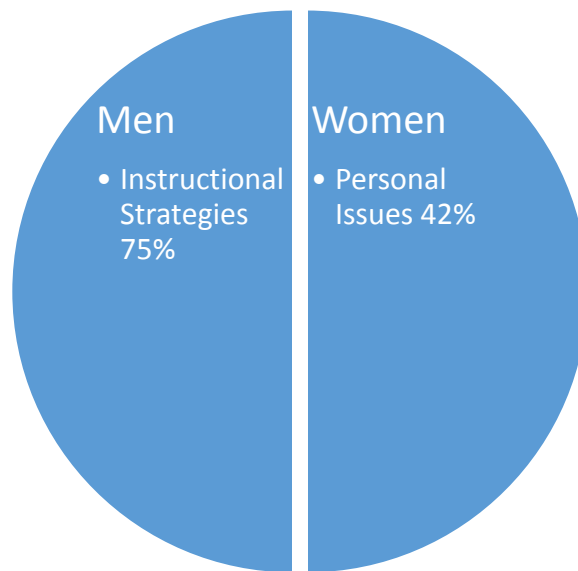


Figure 5. Gender Differences

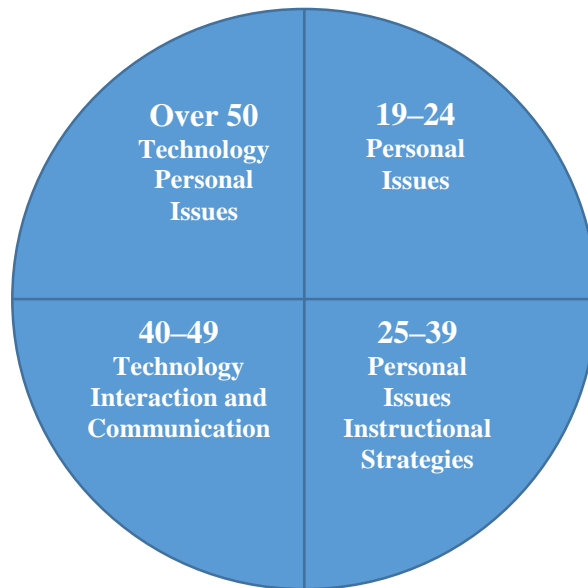


Figure 6. Age Differences

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of the present study, the following recommendations for future research are offered:

1. A survey should be developed and conducted at this institution to determine which elements that facilitated and hindered their learning are most important on a more comprehensive scale.
2. A survey developed from this study could be given at other institutions to determine the extent to which the barriers discovered in this study and student's ideas for improving online learning are consistent across community colleges.
3. A study of faculty could be used to determine what their problems are and what kind of assistance they require to be able to provide adequate feedback and develop high quality online programs.

4. A study could be completed to determine the class size in online learning compared to traditional classroom courses and the effect on quality and timely communications by the instructor.
5. A study might be conducted to investigate an institution who has a online learning tutoring center and use of these services by online learning students.
6. A study could be conducted to analyze best practices of the instructional design associated with online learning.
7. A survey could be developed and administered to further investigate instructor perceptions of online learning and how they relate to student success.
8. This study could be expanded to include other institutions with similar online learning and traditional classroom delivery methods.
9. A study could be undertaken to determine student expectations in online learning with the specific purpose of assisting online learning instructors in improving their course delivery.
10. A study could be developed to analyze the student success of students enrolled in courses taught by full time faculty as related to courses taught by adjunct faculty.

Conclusion

This study offers several implications for practice and research. First, there is a need for effective instructional design for online courses. The design should focus not only on the technological aspects of the course, but also on the goals, objectives, and expectations for the learners. Continuing to explore design models that are most effective for online learning will also help facilitate this activity. Second, there is a need to work with learners to assist them in the development of online success techniques. Online courses are dynamic on multiple levels:

information is received in a variety of formats and at different times. When learners are accustomed to learning in more fixed, real-time contexts, this can create significant time management issues. Assisting learners in establishing strategies for managing their time and study skills may prove to be useful. Finally, there is a need to work with learners to assist them with establishing community or feelings of connection in with peers and instructors. Integrating strategies for community building into the design of the course may assist with this effort. Continued research related to community building strategies in a variety of contexts is also needed to enable the advancement of best practices in the dynamic context of the Web.

The growth of the Internet and online learning will continue, and as indicated in this study, it will come with challenges (Song, 2004). As educators and students become more comfortable and adept at communicating and learning online, it will remain imperative that the best practices associated with these learning environments continue to be explored.

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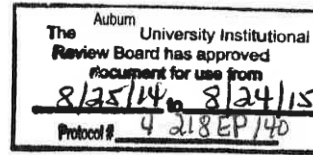
Appendix 1
Interview Questions

1. What kind of activities are you engaged in on campus.
2. How did you feel about online learning before you enrolled in the online course? After?
3. Would you describe yourself as motivated?
4. Do you have a computer at home?
5. Tell me about the process by which you began online learning at Southeast Community College. Describe how you arrived at the decision to enroll in an online course.
6. Tell me about your interactions with the instructor and other students in the course.
7. To what extent did you find the content meaningful? Is there anything that might have made it more meaningful?
8. Have any life situations hindered your success?
9. Tell me about a time when you think you were successful.
10. Tell me about a time when you think you were unsuccessful.
11. What elements cause the greatest distractions?
12. What helped you to learn?
13. What prevented you from learning?
14. What was the best thing about this experience? What was the worst thing?
15. To wrap up, tell me how you think you could have been more successful in the online course in which you were enrolled.

Feel free to call if you begin to think of anything you want to add or clarify.

NOTE: All follow-up interviews will follow this method of questioning. Probing questions will be used throughout the interview(s) to gain a more comprehensive description of participants' experiences.

Appendix 2
Informed Consent Letter



AUBURN UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

(NOTE: DO NOT SIGN THIS DOCUMENT UNLESS AN IRB APPROVAL STAMP WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN APPLIED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

INFORMED CONSENT
for a Research Study entitled
“Factors that Community College Students Perceive as Fostering and Hindering their
Success in Online Learning”

You are invited to participate in a research study to present the student views of issues that prevent comparable grade distribution between online and traditional courses and between successful and unsuccessful students. It also focuses on challenges related to student retention and proposed instructional approaches. The study is being conducted by Amy Wise, doctoral candidate under the direction of Dr. Frances Kochan, Distinguished Professor in the Auburn University Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology. You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently enrolled or have been enrolled in an online community college course and are age 19 or older.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked a series of questions about your online experience and participate in a group discussion about your experience. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about an hour. The interview will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by members of the research team who will transcribe and analyze them. They will then be destroyed.

You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to. Although you won't benefit directly from participating in this study, we hope that your comments will help improve online courses at community colleges across the country.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed. There will be no compensation or cost to participants.

Participant's initials _____

Page 1 of 2

4036 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849-5221; Telephone: 334-844-4460; Fax: 334-844-3072

Appendix 3
Student Comments

Response	Category
Me not being in school for over 20 years.	Personal
Face to face interaction, however, I know if it was needed that I could schedule a meeting with my professor.	Instructional Strategies
	Classroom Management
Not having good enough directions for some of the assignments.	Teaching/Instructional Strategies
Some test questions are not easily answered from reading the eBook.	Technology
I do not have the internet at my house and sometimes work past five so the only time I have is when I can come to the library or SAS lab to do my work.	Technology
The instructor only provides PowerPoints that cover the material which is very vague. Other online instructors provide either video lectures or note pages that elaborate the content.	Classroom Management
I learn better with a variety of audio, visual and hands on learning. The visual and hands on are appropriate but the audio, instructor led instruction is very lacking for macroeconomics.	Instructional Strategies
Timeframe for completing reading material is too short.	Time Management
Most lessons were made available on Saturdays due on Sundays, that's not enough time.	Time Management
We are required to use Learn Smart for assignments. This is all well and good but the tests are almost nothing like the assignments I have studies for these tests and come away from the SAS lab feeling like I have not even opened the book. It would be helpful if the instructor gave weekly updates or otherwise communicated with us students. If he is taking a passive role in his teaching he should allow non-proctored tests or allow note sheets during exams. This course is a complete crap shoot--You don't know how you are doing until it is too late!!	Instructional Strategies
I feel like we are not getting taught anything. We, as students, just buy the book and are told to know it before the test. That's it.	Instructional Strategies
Trying to balance time to do my school work and getting enough time to do it	Time Management
The tests for the course seem to be more about interpretation than right and wrong answers.	Instructional Strategies
I feel that there was very little interaction with the instruction. This course was self-taught & was quite tedious for anyone who has even a basic understanding of computer applications.	Communication
I have no barriers except I work a full time job.	Time Management
Instructor never responds to emails.	Communication
The teacher not responding to questions in a timely manner.	Communication
There is not a lot of communication between the teacher and I.	Communication

Response	Category
Need quicker response from instructor at times.	Communication
The fact that NO ONE, including the instructor, had ever completed any of this ridiculous work before. I have two Bachelor degrees and I am being required to use a calculator for simple subtraction in addition to “learning” how to hook up a VCR. DO they even make VCRs anymore? This is beyond stupid. A complete waste of time.	Personal
Maybe more one on one between students and instructors.	Communication
My own laziness	Personal
The teacher doesn't post online lecture videos or offer additional learning material. I have trouble learning from a power point without any other interaction.	Instructional Strategies
Unfamiliarity with the Canvas site.	Technology
I needed more explanation on how to do the problems. It would help if there was at least a link to the YouTube videos that explain how to do them. I wasn't always sure I understood.	Instructional Strategies
Not checking online all the time.	Personal
Not being able to have a teacher teach the material cause that tends to get these things to stick in your brain.	Instructional Strategies
Distractions at home.	Personal
My instructor takes over 2 days to reply. Also when essays are due and I have questions she doesn't answer them until at least 2 days after and by then I have already figured out how to do it or did it completely wrong and have to start over.	Communication
The teacher's interaction is very rare.	Communication
The professor did not teach anything during this course. She barely has any interaction with us what-so-ever. The only way we can learn in this course is to read the book ourselves, and then when we get to the test, we barely know a thing.	Instructional Strategies
The teacher has a full-time day job and cannot communicate effectively with the students nor does she enter the grades for a long period of time after completion of quizzes.	Classroom Management
Assignments that are not on the calendar. Unclear instructions by the teacher. When the practice quizzes are not accessible in a timely manner before the test.	Classroom Management
Poor interaction	Communication

Student Response	Category
I work nights and I needed to be able to work ahead on my assignments.	Personal
I would have done better in the courses if all of the courses were required to have lecture notes.	Classroom Management
When I had a problem on the weekend the instructor would not reply to my email until the next week. The instructor communication was probably the thing that most hindered my success in this course	Classroom Management
I failed the course because I was unable to schedule a proctored exam. The whole proctored exam process is a nightmare at ESCC.	Teaching/Instructional Strategies
I experienced too many technical difficulties with the CIS program I was trying to use. Courses should not require external software in addition to Canvas. It is confusing to go between 2 systems.	Technology
I also took CIS146 when it was "SAM" and my daughter took it when it was "SNAP". BOTH of these programs are horrible. I do not know HOW much worse one is than the other, but SAM was REALLY, and I do mean REALLY bad. I even thought at one time in that class how sad it was that obviously no one checked out that software before allowing it to be used in a classroom setting! Our entire class was in an uproar over it! It was extremely frustrating to turn in an assignment and have software continuously tell you there were errors when there plainly weren't. It was also so slow to load between questions, etc. and I know it was the software and not my computer because I didn't have problems like that with anything else. I know SNAP is bad too and well, forgive me for saying this, but you asked: It is just not right for an educational institution to require students to use such a sub-standard software.	Technology
This is the first time that I have taken an online class using Canvas (SPH106) and I have to say that the experience has not been great. We have had 2 tests so far that have been graded incorrectly in the software's testing structure and the instructor has stated that he is having trouble with the communication piece to and from students.	Classroom Management
Online learning is a great tool for those working full time or with regular class schedule conflicts. It is understood that each online class, by ESCC policy, is to have one proctored exam each semester. When registering for an online class it is expected to make arrangements during SAS lab hours to complete that exam. However, each instructor has the option to require more than one if not all of them to be proctored. When doing so, it would be extremely beneficial to know that up front when registering for the class. This would allow the student to make a more educated decision in regards to work schedule or family life and successful completion of the course. For example, a student works Monday through Friday, 8-5. That student is taking online classes and one night class. Having to take four or more proctored requires either	Instructional Strategies

Student Response	Category
<p>taking time off from work during the day or going during the late hours of the SAS lab. That may not be possible with the night class schedule and may not be feasible with work. If there is a testing policy in place, continuity and consistency between classes would only benefit the instructor and the student.</p>	
<p>I think online students should have the opportunity to work ahead (assignments, quizzes, test, etc.) It's much easier to do so that way the worry is done and over. I'm my math class last semester I worked ahead as much as I wanted and finished almost a month early... my microcomputer class we only have the opportunity to do homework type assignments in advance all test are only open for about 3 days. I would have been more successful if I could have worked ahead.</p>	Time Management
<p>I would have passed Math if I could have worked ahead. I work at a camp where my free time is extremely limited during the week. If I was able to see the assignments beforehand I would be able to finish them during the weekend so I didn't have to worry about them. I think my grades would definitely be better if I could do that.</p>	Time Management
<p>I would have passed if this course would have had videotaped lectures. I also loved the way Ms. Snellgrove taught her Biology 103 face to face class in Fall of 12. She videotaped her lectures that she gave in on-campus classes and put those same lectures up on Canvas for us to look at later. This would have been so helpful in my online course. She also had excellent "review days" and also those review sessions would be nice for online courses. The videos are the reason I got an A in a traditionally hard to pass face-to-face class!!</p>	Instructional Strategies
<p>I think for the Fall Online Courses each class need to have a study guide for each test and weekly assignments. Also all teacher need a 1-800 number and a weekend number.</p>	Instructional Strategies
<p>It'd be nice for those of us who don't have home internet (and thus have to work when and where we can) to be able to work ahead and so not fall behind. Phone alerts about pending assignments would also be nice, if possible.</p>	Time Management
<p>I am Active Duty Military and unfortunately I am not able to take classes during the day. My time is limited during the day because I am at work. Online and night classes are my only options so it would be nice to see more classes offered online. One class that I would love to see soon (Spring Semester) is A NUTRITION class. I am pursuing my nursing degree and for some reason ESCC doesn't offer the nutrition class that is required by other institutions. This class is important because it is part of the curriculum for the nursing program and since ESCC offers the general classes towards nursing they should offer the nutrition course. This means I have to take that class with another college then transfer the credits and I find that</p>	Options

Student Response	Category
troublesome. With me being military and moving around so much transferring credits can become very tricky. One thing that I do notice is that some instructors give a test on 2–3 Chapters at a time. That wouldn't be too much of a problem if there was something in between each chapter covering the material. It is a little difficult, frustrating, and hard to remember the material when you have to take a test on 3 chapters. On another note I will say that Canvas seems to be much better than Blackboard	
I would not be able to pursue my paralegal degree without online learning so I am happy with online courses being available. But, I would like to see more courses being offered online. At this time not all the courses that I need (paralegal degree) are available online. Due to my work schedule and residing in Brantley, it will be hard for me to attend classes on campus.	Options
I wish I had the option to move along some of my classes quicker and at my own pace. I am an independent learner and fast reader. I feel constrained.	Time Management
I thought since I was taking an online class it was going to be easier because you can do it at your own pace," "You do have more flexibility, but it's not any easier ... It's harder, because you're on your own; you're left on your own.	Misconception
I set aside a specific block of time every day, usually after the kids' bedtime, to work on my classes. That's the only way I pass my online classes. I treat that time just like I would if I were in the actual classroom.	Time Management
To be successful I have to make sure I am checking in all the time. I have the app on my phone so when I am sitting somewhere instead of getting on Facebook I can check into my class and make sure I have done everything for the week.	Time Management
I need a routine so getting into the habit of checking my course everyday helped keep me on schedule and, most importantly, fight my urge to procrastinate.	Study Skills
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Instead of not saying anything to my instructor when I got behind in my online class I should have asked for help. I learned that if you ask for an extension it may help you pass an online class.	Communication
I signed up for too many classes and I had to drop my online course because it was the most time consuming.	Personal

Themes of All Data Collection Instruments

- Instructional Strategies-41
 - Delivery-22
 - Organization-19

- Interaction and Communication-20
 - Instructional-7
 - Personal-13

- Personal Issues-25
 - learning style-12
 - life style-13

- Technology-12
 - Student-9
 - School-3

Total Response: 98 students

Summary of Categories and Themes of Barriers to Success on Online Learning (Survey)

THEME 1- INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Category 1- Delivery -17

1. Professor did not teach anything in this course
2. The only way to learn in this course is to read the book ourselves and then when the tests come , we barely know a thing.
3. Audio instruction is lacking
4. Tests are nothing like the assignments.
5. Lack of adequate teaching
6. Not posting of online lectures
7. Lack of direct teaching
8. Just read the book. Feel like you are teaching yourself
9. Lack of explanation of materials
10. The instruction only provides Power Points that cover the material with is very vague
11. He is taking a passive role in his teaching
12. I feel like we are not getting taught anything. We, as students, just buy the book and are told to know it before the test.
13. This course was self-taught and was quite tedious
14. Does not offer any online lectures –videos or offer additional learning materials
15. Would help to have links to Youtube videos to explain things. I was not sure I always understood
16. Not having a teacher who taught the course
17. Unclear instructions

Category 2- Organization

1. Practice quizzes are not accessible in a timely manner before the test.
2. Most lessons were made available on Saturday for Sunday. That is not enough time
3. Not having good enough directions for some of the assignments
4. Some test questions are not easily answered from reading the ebook
5. Timeline for completing reading material is too short.
6. Inappropriate time frames from content to tests
7. Tests do not match the assignments
8. There are no updates or feedback given on work
9. No feedback on tests
10. No posting of grades
11. Does not enter grades for long periods of time
12. Assignments are not on the calendar, cannot plan or work ahead of time
13. Instructions for assignments are unclear
14. Quizzes are not accessible in a timely manner
15. Assignments that are not on the calendar

THEME 2 – INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION

Category 1 Instructional

1. No feedback on assignments
2. Not enough feedback on tests
3. No updates or comments on work
4. Little interaction about material
5. No direct teaching
6. You do not know how you are doing until it is too late
7. Does not enter grades for a long period of time after completion of quizzes

Category 2 Personal

1. Has a full time job and does not have time to respond to students
2. Never response to emails
3. No responses to questions
4. Late responses to questions if any
5. Not a lot of communication between the instructor and I
6. Need quicker responses from the instructor
7. Little or no interaction
8. Takes over two days to reply and by then I have already figured out how to do it or did it completely wrong and have to start over.
9. Interactions are rare
10. Very little interaction
11. Poor interactions

THEME 3 – PERSONAL ISSUES

Category 1- Learning or personal style

1. I learn better with a variety of audi0, visual and hands on learning
2. I have trouble learning from a PPT without any other interaction
3. I need more explanation on how to do problems
4. Not checking on line all the time

Category 2- Lifestyle issues

1. Not being in school for 20 years
2. Distractions at home
3. My own laziness
4. Trying to balance time to do my school work and getting enough time to do it.
5. Work a full time job

THEME 5- TECHNOLOGY

Category 1- Student Issue

1. Do not have internet at home
2. Unfamiliarity with the Canvas site

Category 2 School Issue

Discussion Board Categories

Themes:

- Personal
 - life style–2
 - learning style–2
- Instructional Strategies
 - Delivery–3
 - Organization–2
- Technology
 - School–3
 - Personal
- Interaction and Communication
 - Personal–1

Statement	Category
I work nights and I needed to be able to work ahead on my assignments.	Personal LIFESTYLE
I would have done better in the courses if all of the courses were required to have lecture notes.	INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES DELIVERY
When I had a problem on the weekend the instructor would not reply to my email until the next week. The instructor communication was probably the thing that most hindered my success in this course	Interaction and Communication Personal
I failed the course because I was unable to schedule a proctored exam. The whole proctored exam process is a nightmare at ESCC.	Instructional Strategies Organization
I experienced too many technical difficulties with the CIS program I was trying to use. Courses should not require external software in addition to Canvas. It is confusing to go between 2 systems.	Technology School
I also took CIS146 when it was "SAM" and my daughter took it when it was "SNAP". BOTH of these programs are horrible. I do not know HOW much worse one is than the other, but SAM was REALLY, and I do mean REALLY bad. I even thought at one time in that class how sad it was that obviously no one checked out that software before allowing it to be used in a classroom setting! Our entire class was in an uproar over it! It was extremely frustrating to turn in an assignment and have software continuously tell you there were errors when there plainly weren't. It was also so slow to load between questions, etc. and I know it was the software and not my computer because I didn't have problems like that with anything else. I know	Technology School

Statement	Category
<p>SNAP is bad too and well, forgive me for saying this, but you asked: It is just not right for an educational institution to require students to use such a sub-standard software.</p>	
<p>This is the first time that I have taken an online class using Canvas (SPH106) and I have to say that the experience has not been great. We have had 2 tests so far that have been graded incorrectly in the software's testing structure and the instructor has stated that he is having trouble with the communication piece to and from students.</p>	<p>Technology School</p>
<p>Online learning is a great tool for those working full time or with regular class schedule conflicts. It is understood that each online class, by ESCC policy, is to have one proctored exam each semester. When registering for an online class it is expected to make arrangements during SAS lab hours to complete that exam. However, each instructor has the option to require more than one if not all of them to be proctored. When doing so, it would be extremely beneficial to know that up front when registering for the class. This would allow the student to make a more educated decision in regards to work schedule or family life and successful completion of the course. For example, a student works Monday through Friday, 8-5. That student is taking online classes and one night class. Having to take four or more proctored requires either taking time off from work during the day or going during the late hours of the SAS lab. That may not be possible with the night class schedule and may not be feasible with work. If there is a testing policy in place, continuity and consistency between classes would only benefit the instructor and the student.</p>	<p>Instructional Strategies Organization for what I have in yellow</p>
<p>I think online students should have the opportunity to work ahead (assignments, quizzes, test, etc.). It's much easier to do so that way the worry is done and over. In my math class last semester I worked ahead as much as I wanted and finished almost a month early... my microcomputer class we only have the opportunity to do homework type assignments in advance all test are only open for about 3 days. I would have been more successful if I could have worked ahead.</p>	<p>Instructional</p>

Statement	Category
<p>I would have passed Math if I could have worked ahead. I work at a camp where my free time is extremely limited during the week. If I was able to see the assignments beforehand I would be able to finish them during the weekend so I didn't have to worry about them during the week. I think my grades would definitely be better if I could do that.</p>	<p>Time Management</p>
<p>I would have passed if this course would have had videotaped lectures. I also loved the way Ms. Snellgrove taught her Biology 103 face-to-face class in Fall of 12. She videotaped her lectures that she gave in on-campus classes and put those same lectures up on Canvas for us to look at later. This would have been so helpful in my online course. She also had excellent “review days” and also those review sessions would be nice for online courses. The videos are the reason I got an A in a traditionally hard face-to-face class to pass!!</p>	<p>Instructional Strategies Delivery</p>
<p>I think for the Fall Online Courses each class needs to have a study guide for each test and weekly assignments. Also, all teachers need a 1-800 number and a weekend number.</p>	<p>Instructional Strategies Delivery</p>
<p>It'd be nice for those of us who don't have home internet (and thus have to work when and where we can) to be able to work ahead and so not fall behind. Phone alerts about pending assignments would also be nice, if possible.</p>	
<p>I am Active Duty Military and unfortunately am not able to take classes during the day. My time is limited during the day because I am at work. Online and night classes are my only options so it would be nice to see more classes offered online. One class that I would love to see soon (Spring Semester) is a NUTRITION class. I am pursuing my nursing degree and for some reason ESCC doesn't offer the nutrition class that is required by other institutions. This class is important because it is part of the curriculum for the nursing program and since ESCC offers the general classes towards Nursing they should offer the nutrition course. This means I have to take that class with another college then transfer the credits and I find that troublesome. With me being military and moving around so much transferring credits can become very tricky. One thing that I do notice is that some instructors give a test on 2–3 Chapters at a time.</p>	<p>Options</p>

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Instead of not saying anything to my instructor when I got behind in my online class I should have asked for help. I learned that if you ask for an extension it may help you pass an online class.	Personal-Learning Style
I signed up for too many classes and I had to drop my online course because it was the most time consuming.	Personal

Interview Categories

4 Themes:

- Personal–12
 - life factors–6
 - learning style–6
- Instructional Strategies–7
 - Delivery–2
 - Organization–5
- Technology–7
 - Student Issue–4
 - School Issue–3
- Interaction and Communication-0

Statement	Category	Student Demographics
I got behind and it was too hard to catch up	Organizational/Time Management	Ashley, 22, Female, White
I had personal problems	Personal-lifestyle	Andrea, 48, Female, White
I couldn't handle combined study plus work or family responsibilities. "I didn't have these problems with Face to Face courses because I had a set time to come to school. I never found the time to sit down and do my online work."	Personal-lifestyle	
"I had a set time to be somewhere, with the online course there was always a reason why I couldn't sit down to do the work.	Personal This is the flexibility issue. Having trouble organizing themselves. Why was this not a problem for her in face-to-face classes. Learning Style	Summer, 19, Female, White
I didn't like the online format. I liked that I could access all of my course work at one time, but I did not like the way all of the files were in one section. It seemed I was always looking for something.	Organization	Brad, 30, Male, White
"I do not like Canvas, it is very difficult to use. I can't find any of my notes, the stuff I am looking for never seemed to be available." (Instructor did not organize course well or no when something wasn't published)."	Organizational Issues Is this the teacher/course? Instructional strategies Maybe it goes with Instructional Strategies and you have two subsets,	Judy, 54, Female, Asian

Statement	Category	Student Demographics
	Course organization and Instructional Strategies.	
I didn't like the instructor's teaching style. "The instructor had power point presentations with no lecture notes. The exams came from the textbook test bank but did not match the PowerPoints.	Teaching/Instructional Strategies Delivery	Randall, 48, Male, W
I experienced too many technical difficulties "Videos wouldn't load, my internet was too slow, I was using the wrong browser."	Technology Student	Natasha, 28, Female, B
The course was taking too much time. It seemed like I never got caught up. The work was too time consuming. I felt like I was being punished for not coming to the campus to take the class.	Time Management	Vera, 37, Female, Hispanic
"I had so much work today online, more than the in class did. It seems like they punish you for taking an online course."	Instructional Strategies-Delivery	Andy, 19, Male, White
I lacked motivation. I am kinda of a procrastinator. I work better under pressure, but sometimes I end up not completing a task because I wait until the last minute.	Personal Why did this not affect the student in face-to-face classes?	Justin, 22, Male, Black
I signed up for too many courses and had to cut down on my course load	Personal	Trey, 58, Male, White
The course was too difficult. The homework and the exams did not match. I never knew what to study for or what was going to be on the exam	Instructional Strategies-Delivery	Brandi, 30 Female, White
I could have tried harder to find time to study longer and get ahead of my assignments.	Personal	Natasha, 28, Female, B
Learners need to be prepared that there are times when you have technical difficulties and you	Technology Student	Brad, 30, Male, White

Statement	Category	Student Demographics
can't really do anything about that.		
Get a newer computer with more updated software!! My laptop is 5 years old and needs additional hardware components."	Technology Student	Judy, 54, Female, Asian
"If you can get face-to-face [they] are good...a kick-off one [meeting] I think is very helpful...it puts faces to people."	Instructional Strategies-Delivery	Paula
So many technical issues...that it seemed to take up the whole focus and the instructor really didn't know what to do to fix them. (technical-any more details)	Technology School	Andrea, 48, Female, White
If I asked a question about why a page wasn't loading my instructor had no idea how to help me.	Technology School	Summer, 19, Female, White
I think instructors should have a basic knowledge of how the system works.(teacher expertise)	Technology School	Amy, 48, Female, Black
I did not own a computer and did not have internet service in her home, while another student was learning on a tablet. In addition, students were using several different computers that seemed to cause a problem due to the specifications and capabilities being different on the two computers. (technical)	Technology Student	Loma, 49, Female, White
She gave us instructions on the first day and I didn't hear from her again until I asked a question. It was like she wanted the software to teach the course.	Instructional Strategies-Delivery	Trey, 58, Male, White
I am one of those people who can sit face-to-face and tell you everything I've learned but when it comes to timed tests, I stress out more than I should and don't do as well as I could. I think I could have been more successful	Personal Learning Style	Justin, 22, Male, Black

Statement	Category	Student Demographics
if I had more time to devote to each of my classes.		
I am not a fan of non-traditional learning. I have to do more work to pass an online class than I do if I go into a face-to-face class and just listen to the instructor. “My experience is that online teachers try to punish for taking an online course. I don’t have to study near as much for the same face to face course.”	Personal Learning Style	Andy, 19, Male, White
Classroom interaction is much more beneficial to learning. I learn better when I can form a study group with the people in the course with me. We can help each other understand what the teacher is talking about.	Personal Learning Style	Trey, 58, Male, White
The issue is I had no choice but to take some classes on line because the face-to-face course was full. “I probably didn’t have a very positive attitude going into the online course because I really wanted to take it face-to-face	Personal	Brandi, 30 Female, Hispanic
The course content (mathematics) is “difficult subject” to take online. I need to see the problem worked on the board, instead of me just sitting down by myself and trying to do the homework.	Personal Learning style	Jennifer, 28, Female, White
Distractions- For me to be studying till late at night and not be able to rest properly.	Personal Lifestyle	Tina, 34, Female, Asian