

2021

## Students' Perceptions of Faculty Social Presence in Online Gateway Classes

Michelle Whitley Turner  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Michelle Whitley Turner

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2021

Abstract

Students' Perceptions of Faculty Social Presence in Online Gateway Classes

by

Michelle Whitley Turner

M.Phil., Walden University, 2020

MA, Wright State University, 1992

BA, Wright State University, 1984

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

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## Abstract

The number of postsecondary students taking online classes increased in the last 2 decades and grew substantially in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning offers opportunities for postsecondary students who cannot or do not want to attend face-to-face classes but presents a challenge with some students feeling disconnected. Positive faculty social presence is a way to address this issue. The purpose of this basic descriptive, qualitative study was to explore the underresearched area of postsecondary students' perceptions of faculty social presence in online gateway classes at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university in the U.S. Midwest focused on adult learners. The research questions addressed how participants perceived faculty social presence in the online classes and how that presence affected their learning. The conceptual framework was Garrison's concept of social presence. Eight students participated in semistructured interviews, and the resulting data were coded for emergent themes. Findings showed that how professors demonstrated social presence affected how students felt about the faculty and course and how students perceived that presence affected their learning. Students reported perceiving synchronous virtual meetings, asynchronous interactions, and faculty demeanor as the most important ways professors demonstrated their social presence and affected the students' learning. The findings could lead to positive social change by increasing knowledge of how postsecondary online students perceive faculty social presence and how that affects their learning as well as helping online postsecondary faculty adjust their social presence so students might have improved success and earn degrees, leading to better jobs and benefits.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the person who first taught me the magic and power of the written word, my mom, Ellen Davis Whitley, who read me stories from Little Golden Books before I could even speak, and to my children, Elizabeth Kate Turner and Alexander William Turner, who have helped me in a thousand-million ways including saying, “You can do this, Mom!” whenever I wondered if I could. You two are the joys of my life and I love you with all my heart. I couldn’t have done it without you and so many others including my mom and my dad, Colonel (Ret.) Lee Whitley; my sister, Cyndi; my brother, Mitch; my nieces and nephews; my cousins, aunts, and uncles, especially my Uncle Larry who let my 3-year-old self stay up late at night and read my Little Golden Books while Larry studied for law school; Mark, who also loves Elizabeth and Alexander; Levi, who is so good to Elizabeth and Alexander; Kim, who always knows exactly the right words; and my other dear friends and colleagues who encouraged me all the way; Dr. Jim Schumann, who was always there for me in a pet crisis; and all my beloved animals, from my rescued English bulldogs including the incomparable Princess who slept under my desk to my rescued cats who visited me in my office and sometimes tried to help by walking on my keyboard. I thank you all.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

By their nature, online classes provide a different experience for students than face-to-face classes do. While face-to-face classes offer opportunities for students and faculty to share the same physical space and see and talk to each other in real time without technological assistance, online classes require students and faculty to interact through emails, course messages, recordings, interactive virtual meetings, telephone calls, and other technological means (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017). Although the advancement of technology and increased familiarity with online communication by both faculty and students may help increase the number and kinds of opportunities for students and faculty to interact (Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017), challenges remain for students and faculty in online classes with technology and communication (Gillett-Swan, 2017; Robb & Sutton, 2014; Sari & Nayir, 2020) and with students and faculty feeling a sense of isolation (Gillett-Swan, 2017; Rath et al., 2019).

In the years before the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, online learning had become an increasingly key factor in postsecondary education as evidenced by the increase in online education classes each year from 2003 to 2019 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, 2020a). In the 2018–2019 academic year, 35.3% of all postsecondary students were enrolled in some or all online classes (U.S. Department of Education, 2020a). For older students, the numbers were even higher. For the years of 2015–2016, 50.7% of the undergraduate students in degree programs at U.S. universities aged 24 to 29 and 53.8% of the undergraduate students 30 years old and older were taking some or

all their classes online (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These trends seemed likely to continue since online enrollments had increased in times of economic growth and decline as well as in periods when overall enrollments were increasing or were decreasing (Seaman et al., 2018).

However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in online learning suddenly became one of the few available options for students to continue their educations (OECD, 2020). Postsecondary students around the world who had been enrolled in face-to-face classes almost overnight found themselves in online classes facilitated by the internet; webcams; interactive technologies, such as Zoom and other teleconferencing platforms; and even television and radio in some areas (OECD, 2020). As traditional, face-to-face classes become available again, it seems likely that many of the students forced to go to class online will return to face-to-face classes, although some may continue taking some or all their classes online (OECD, 2020).

For students who cannot or do not want to attend face-to-face classes to advance their educations or for students who may want to take both face-to-face and online classes for increased opportunities in scheduling and courses, online postsecondary education offers expanded opportunities (Seaman et al., 2018). For working adults or those with other responsibilities such as families, online classes may be especially attractive due to the flexibility (Seaman et al., 2018). Just as face-to-face classes do, online classes offer students the opportunity to advance their education and earn the degrees they need to compete in the workplace, have better health, better safety on the job, and increased happiness (Trostel, 2015).

Online learning has been found to be challenging regarding promoting meaningful and effective interactions due to the lack of traditional, face-to-face communications among students and faculty and the need to communicate using technology in one or more forums such as email, web conferences, and discussion forums (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Meikleham & Hugo, 2020; Purarjomandlangrudi & Chen, 2019). These challenges have been highlighted with the sudden movement to online classes from face-to-face classes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sari & Nayır, 2020). Since many universities and colleges already offered some or all of their courses online, these higher education institutions had more experience helping faculty and students navigate the challenges of online learning and may have moved face-to-face classes online more quickly and presumably more adeptly than other schools (OECD, 2020). Even for schools with some experience offering online courses as well as face-to-face classes, the abrupt change resulted in significant challenges because many face-to-face course materials were not designed for online learning, many professors had little or no experience teaching online, and many students were unused to online learning (OECD, 2020). For instance, in a qualitative study, 65 teachers, administrators, and academics reported the perceived challenges of moving classes online suddenly as a result of the pandemic, including problems with internet access, inadequate infrastructure and training, lack of preparedness by both faculty and students, problems with classroom management, and issues in connecting with and interacting with students (Sari & Nayır, 2020).

As part of a theory of college student involvement developed from extensive research, Astin (1999) argued that frequent student-faculty interactions are more strongly associated with postsecondary students' levels of satisfaction than any other type of student involvement or characteristic of the students or universities. Increased levels of satisfaction expressed by postsecondary students who often interacted with their professors extended beyond the classroom to such areas as how satisfied the students are with the university, their friends, the courses available, and the learning environment (Astin, 1999). Student-faculty interactions have been found to have significant effects on student gains in an array of different areas, such as general education, career preparation, and personal development (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Lundberg et al., 2018; Purarjomandlangrudi & Chen, 2019).

Students in online classes, especially those who experience less student-faculty interaction than students in face-to-face classes do, have been found to have lower grades (Glazier, 2016), lower rates of retention (Glazier, 2016), decreased academic motivation (Trolan et al., 2016), and lower levels of development in cognitive skill (Kim & Lundberg, 2016).

Researchers have recommended further research in postsecondary students' learning related to faculty social presence and student-faculty interactions (see Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017; Robb & Sutton, 2014). In regular checks of the literature, I have found no qualitative research on postsecondary students' perceptions of faculty social presence or how faculty social presence was perceived by the students as affecting their learning in online gateway (i.e., entry) classes at a 4-year, private,



nonprofit university focused on adult learners. Based on the historical and possible future increases in online education (Park & Kim, 2020; Seaman et al., 2018) and the importance of student-faculty interactions in learning (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Purarjomandlangrudi & Chen, 2019), exploring postsecondary students' perceptions of faculty social presence in their online courses could lead to increased knowledge that could be used to maximize faculty social presence to help support the learning and success of online students. Improved student learning and success in their online courses could help these postsecondary students complete their degrees, advance their careers, and improve their socioeconomic status (Lansing, 2017; Trostel, 2015). In addition to the benefits that obtaining a college degree offers individuals, society also may benefit in the form of increased taxes paid, some of which help fund social programs; increased giving to charitable causes; lower crime rates; and increased levels of graduates' community involvement as leaders and participants (Trostel, 2015).

Chapter 1 includes the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research question, the conceptual framework, and the nature of the study including the rationale for the study design selected. For clarity in key concepts, definitions of important terms also are provided in this chapter. My assumptions, the scope and delimitations of the study, the study limitations, the significance of the study, and the implications for positive social change also are discussed in Chapter 1. The chapter closes with a summary.

## **Background**

Following the invention in the early 1970s of email and computer conferencing with asynchronous, text-based information and interactions, the first completely online course, an adult education class, was offered in 1981 (Harasim, 2000). A year later, an executive education program became the first online program; the first online undergraduate course and the first graduate online course were held in 1984 and 1985, respectively, and in 1986, the first online degree program was launched (Harasim, 2000). The internet made its entry in 1989 and the world wide web in 1989 (Harasim, 2000). Another important milestone on the road to modern online education in higher education came with the increased use of computers for conferencing. At that time, conferencing did not refer to a learning management system (LMS) as it can today but instead to the ability of individuals to type posts and respond to others' posts in the online classroom using asynchronous, text-based interactions (Garrison et al., 2000).

The technology used in those early online courses limited interaction between students and faculty as a result of the heavy reliance on text-based, computer-mediated communication, such as emails and posts typed in the classroom (Garrison et al., 2000). As computers and telecommunications advanced through the availability of the internet, a variety of techniques and delivery methods, such as through LMSs, became available to facilitate online learning, including webcams; recorded video sessions; online discussion forums; electronic textbooks; and combinations of asynchronous and synchronous learning tools, such as Skype, Blackboard Collaborate, and Zoom (Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017). These advancements offered more methods and opportunities for both faculty and

students to engage and communicate with each other in the virtual classroom as well as for faculty members to convey a sense of their presence, engagement, and approachability in the virtual classroom, or, in other words, their *social presence*, a term first used by Short et al. (1976) in their foundational research in this area (Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017).

The concept of social presence has its roots in social psychology studies in the 1960s and early 1970s, starting with the work of Short et al. (1976) related to nonverbal communication, intimacy, immediacy, and interpersonal behaviors (Swan, 2017). Short et al.'s research offered insights into the problems experienced by individuals communicating through technological methods rather than face to face, such as feelings of isolation and being disconnected from others, as well as a way to address some of those issues through the use of social presence (Swan, 2017). Widely acknowledged as the pioneers in the field of social presence, Short et al. focused on the social presence in the context of business communications conducted using technology and argued that the medium used for the communication affected the nature and quality of the interaction for the participants. Short et al. defined the term social presence as the "salience, or quality or state of being there, between two communicators using a communication medium" (Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017, p. 32). Using this definition, Short et al. developed a continuum of how effectively a method of communication, such as face to face, video, and computer-mediated with text, conveyed an individual's social presence (Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017). Based on this continuum, Short et al. argued that communication methods that allowed high levels of social presence to be exhibited were warmer and

more personal than methods that provided lower levels of social presence, such as text-only messages conveyed by computer, were.

From this perspective, technologically facilitated methods of communication that allow individuals to convey as well as to see and hear cues through speech and body language in a conversation would let the individuals in the interaction demonstrate more social presence than methods without the ability to allow auditory and visual cues (Swan, 2017). Based on this perspective, a message sent to another individual by a typed message in a computer-mediated conference without sound or video would be seen as less effective for satisfactory communication than a two-way video connection as a result of the lower level of social presence. Unsurprisingly, with the technology available then, computer-mediated communications would seem to be less desirable than face-to-face interactions such as was typical in classroom settings because of the reduced level of social presence.

Improvements in technology and ways of employing technology to communicate with others led to new perspectives on the presence of social presence in computer-mediated methods of communications (Richardson et al., 2017; Swan, 2017). Researchers began to question if computer-mediated communications conveyed through newer and faster technology were always more impersonal and less satisfying than face-to-face interactions to the individuals involved (Swan, 2017). The idea that perhaps social presence could be conveyed in ways other than through visual and auditory cues prompted Walther (1992) and others to explore effective communication experiences for some individuals in certain contexts (see Richardson et al., 2017; Swan, 2017).

Walther (1992) found that the more time spent on a computer-mediated exchange and increased numbers of interactions between individuals communicating using technology decreased the impersonal nature of the exchanges. In other words, a short, task-focused message sent from one person to another using computer technology often did seem impersonal, much as a perfunctory email sent today related to a business matter such as alerting another person that a package had been sent would seem. However, if an individual sent such messages regularly to the same person, the messages might grow to include relational aspects, such as asking how the weather at the other location was or if the other person had enjoyed a recent holiday. This change in the interactions would be similar to situations that occur in face-to-face interactions, such as how people may speak genially but perfunctorily to a delivery person they have seen only once or twice, but over time, such as seeing the same delivery person regularly, the exchanges may become less impersonal as a type of relationship develops. Similarly, an extended messaging event through computer technology, such as with individuals revising a report together or solving a computer problem, could result in less impersonal interactions.

The idea that social presence might vary with individuals' personalities and other factors, such as time and familiarity, was advanced with Gunawardena and Zittle's (1997) study measuring the effectiveness of social presence in predicting the satisfaction of learners using computer-mediated communications. Using a social/relational perspective, they built on the research of Short et al. (1976) with a focus on the immediacy and intimacy of the communication process. In addition to concluding that social presence is a strong predictor of learner satisfaction in a text-based computer conference

environment, Gunawardena and Zittle also found that participants who reported feeling higher levels of social presence adapted by using emoticons to supplement the basic text messages they sent to others in an attempt to make up for the lack of visual and verbal cues (p. 23). Richardson and Swan (2003) found that higher levels of students' perceptions of social presence were associated with higher levels of perceived learning in those students as well as the students' level of satisfaction with their professors.

With the foundation of these preceding research studies and others, studies of social presence in postsecondary online education have diverged in a variety of directions from the effects of social presence on aspects of the students' experiences to ways of improving social presence in online classes to the importance of making faculty, course designers, and others in higher education aware of the ways in which social presence can be used to improve the students' experiences in their online classes (Richardson et al., 2017; Swan, 2017).

In the current study, I explored faculty social presence from the perspective of postsecondary undergraduate students in online gateway (i.e., entry) classes at a 4-year, private, nonprofit U.S. university in the Midwest that focuses on adult learners. With the historical and anticipated increases in online learning at the postsecondary level, including in universities that focus on adult learners, this study was important as a way to explore postsecondary students' perceptions of faculty social presence and how students perceive that the faculty social presence may affect their learning. That knowledge could be used to help curriculum designers, faculty, and department chairs to increase the effectiveness of faculty social presence in online classes in similar settings. In turn, the

students might learn more effectively, earn their degrees, and reach a higher standard of living that could benefit not only themselves but also their families and communities (Lansing, 2017; Trostel, 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

The research problem was that there was a lack of knowledge about the perceptions of postsecondary students at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university for adult learners about faculty social presence in their online gateway (i.e., entry) classes and how these postsecondary students perceive that faculty social presence affects their learning. Without this knowledge, curriculum designers, faculty, and department chairs may not be able to increase the effectiveness of online classes in similar settings. Faculty social presence in postsecondary classes has been found to affect students' levels of motivation and course completion (Robb & Sutton, 2014), affective learning (Russo & Benson, 2005), student satisfaction (Russo & Benson, 2005; Wise et al., 2004), and perceived and actual learning (Hostetter & Busch, 2013; Kang & Im, 2013). However, these studies did not focus on the specific research problem addressed in this study, suggesting a gap in the research literature.

I found gaps in the research literature in the populations of students studied, the types of studies, and the elements focused on in the studies. For example, the data from a study on how online learning may affect student engagement in postsecondary classes were compiled from National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) research on postsecondary students in general rather than from a research study with a specific focus on online learning (Dumford & Miller, 2018). Other examples include a study on student

satisfaction and faculty social presence that focused only on mentoring (Wise et al., 2004) and a study that looked solely at the effects of motivational emails from the faculty member on the levels of motivation and course completion of online postsecondary students in transfer and vocational classes at a community college (Robb & Sutton, 2014). Another example is a study on the effects of faculty social presence on postsecondary students' levels of perceived and actual learning that included only students majoring in social work (Hostetter & Busch, 2013). While a study on faculty social presence was conducted at a large, public university in the Midwest, that research used a multiple-case study approach that explored instructor social presence using data from graduate-level, online classes; unlike the current study, no students were interviewed to explore their perceptions of the faculty social presence (Richardson et al., 2015). The current study had a different setting at a different university, a different demographic with undergraduate students in gateway classes, and a different research approach with the basic qualitative design.

In this study, I explored an area of faculty social presence that had not yet been researched, the perceptions of postsecondary students in online gateway (i.e., entry) classes at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university in the U.S. Midwest with a focus on adult learners regarding faculty social presence in their classes and how they perceived the faculty social presence had affected their learning. Addressing this gap in understanding may help curriculum designers, faculty, and department chairs improve how faculty social presence is demonstrated, which may lead to the increased effectiveness of online classes in similar settings and increased learning for postsecondary students.



### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore postsecondary students' perceptions of faculty social presence in their online gateway courses at a 4-year, private, nonprofit, Midwestern U.S. university that focuses on adult learners and to explore how the postsecondary students perceive the faculty social presence as affecting their learning. Exploring these perceptions may help curriculum designers, faculty, and department chairs improve how faculty social presence is demonstrated, which may lead to the increased effectiveness of online classes in similar settings and increased learning for postsecondary students.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do postsecondary students at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university in the U.S. Midwest that focuses on adult learners perceive faculty social presence in their online gateway classes?

RQ2: How do postsecondary students at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university in the U.S. Midwest that focuses on adult learners perceive faculty social presence in their online gateway classes as affecting their learning?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was Garrison's (2017) concept of social presence, which views social presence as how individuals identify with others in a group, communicate intentionally when they feel they can trust the environment, and develop relationships with others in the group by establishing themselves through their own

personalities. Definitions of the concept of social presence and conceptual frameworks based on the concept differ depending on the perspectives of the researchers employing the concept and remains under research (Richardson et al., 2017; Swan, 2017). The concept of social presence is discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

In this qualitative study, I used a basic descriptive qualitative design, as articulated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). This qualitative research approach was consistent with the goal of exploring the perceptions of postsecondary students regarding faculty social presence in their online classes. I recruited postsecondary students who had completed at least one fully online gateway (i.e., entry) course since January 2019 at the 4-year, private, nonprofit, Midwestern U.S. university that focused on adult learners to participate in this study. I interviewed 8 students using an online video platform, such as Zoom, or by telephone as the participants preferred. I analyzed the data using open coding to derive themes.

### **Definitions**

*Asynchronous learning*: Instruction that occurs “with a time lag between the presentation of instructional stimuli and student responses” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a, p. 4).

*Online learning*: “Learning that takes place partially or entirely over the internet” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a, p. 9).

*Postsecondary education*: A formal instructional program for students above the compulsory age for high school, including academic, vocational, and continuing

professional education but not vocational and adult basic education programs U.S. Department of Education, 2020b, p. 31).

*Postsecondary education institution:* “An institution which has as its sole purpose or one of its primary missions, the provision of postsecondary education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2020b, p. 31).

*Social presence:* This term has many definitions in the literature depending on the researchers’ perspectives (see Richardson et al., 2017). In this study, I used Garrison’s (2017) definition of social presence, which is how individuals identify with others in a group, communicate intentionally when they feel they can trust the environment, and develop relationships with others in the group by establishing themselves through their own personalities.

*Student-faculty interactions:* Any interactions between a student and the student’s faculty member including formal interactions, such as in synchronous classroom sessions and written feedback, and in more personal interactions, such as through individual emails, telephone calls, text messages, or one-on-one online meetings through an interactive method such as Skype or Zoom (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018).

*Synchronous learning:* “Instruction occurring in real time whether in a physical or a virtual place” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a, p. 4).

### **Assumptions**

This study was based on multiple assumptions. One assumption was the participants would be able to recall and would be willing to share their perceptions about their interactions with faculty in their online courses, especially regarding their

perceptions of faculty social presence. Another assumption was that the participants had enough experience with and recall of the phenomenon to be able to respond to the interview questions. This assumption seemed likely to be accurate because the postsecondary students taking online gateway (i.e., entry) classes at the 4-year, private, nonprofit university under study were required during their classes to attend and participate in synchronous, virtual class meetings facilitated by their professors. If a student could not attend one of these synchronous sessions, they were required to review the recording and submit a summary of the session along with questions and comments to the professor, which the professor then responded to as needed. In addition, both students and faculty at this university were required to participate and interact with each other in the online discussion forums. I also assumed that the participants would respond truthfully about their experiences and perceptions.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this basic qualitative research study was postsecondary students at a 4-year, private, nonprofit, Midwestern U.S. university with a focus on adult learners who were over the age of 18 and who had completed at least one online gateway (i.e., entry) course since January of 2019 in any field of study. The students could have attended part time or full time. The online classes taken by the students could have been any of the gateway classes offered at the university.

The delimitations of this study included participant exclusions. To participate in the current study, the students could not have had me as a professor at any time or have been interviewed by me as part of an earlier research study conducted by others at the

university. No limitations were placed regarding the students' fields of study, whether they attended part time or full time, or the number of years the students had been at the university. Other delimitations of this study were that I did not focus on the students' self-perceptions of their own social presence or that of their peers.

### **Limitations**

Possible limitations of the study related to the design and methodology included technological issues during interviews that could have inhibited participants' responses, self-selection of participants, faulty memories of the participants about faculty social presence in their online classes, and lack of awareness by the students about their experiences. Limitations related to transferability included that although many U.S. postsecondary institutions in the Midwest offer online gateway courses, those classes may not be set up in the same way as those at the study site were, with synchronous virtual meetings required during the courses, for example. Another limitation was that the university under study is a 4-year, private, nonprofit institution that focuses on serving adult postsecondary learners rather than traditional postsecondary students. An additional limitation to transferability was that there are many definitions of social presence, but Garrison's (2017) concept of social presence was the one used to inform this study.

### **Significance**

The results of this study could be useful by advancing the body of knowledge in the discipline regarding the perceptions of postsecondary students in online gateway (i.e., entry) classes at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university with a focus on adult learners about faculty social presence in their online classes and the postsecondary students'

perceived effects of the faculty social presence on their learning. The findings could contribute to the development of practices and policies related to online course design, classroom instruction, and faculty training to improve how faculty social presence is demonstrated, which may lead to the increased effectiveness of online classes in similar settings and increased learning for postsecondary students. The resulting improved learning might help the students complete their educational programs. Positive social change could occur as a result of the students earning their degrees, which could help them obtain jobs and improve their socioeconomic standing and that of their families. With increased income and status, the students might also increase their involvement in neighborhood, community, political, religious, and social activities (Trostel, 2015).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I addressed the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research question, the conceptual framework, and the nature of the study including the rationale for the study design selected. I also defined the key concepts and addressed assumptions, the scope and delimitations of the study, the study limitations, the significance of the study, and the implications for positive social change. In Chapter 2, empirical literature related to the research problem will be analyzed and the conceptual framework will be further developed.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The research problem was that there was a lack of knowledge about the perceptions of postsecondary students at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university for adult learners about faculty social presence in their online gateway classes and how these postsecondary students perceived that faculty social presence affected their learning. Exploring the perceptions of postsecondary students about faculty social presence and their perceptions of how the faculty social presence affected their learning in their online gateway classes at a 4-year, private, nonprofit, U.S. university in the Midwest that focuses on adult learners may help curriculum designers, faculty, and department chairs improve how faculty social presence is demonstrated, which may lead to an increased effectiveness of online classes in similar settings and increased learning for similar postsecondary students.

Researchers have found a variety of ways in which students' perceptions of the faculty social presence in online classes may affect the students' learning, such as students' levels of motivation and course completion (Robb & Sutton, 2014), affective learning (Russo & Benson, 2005), student satisfaction (Russo & Benson, 2005; Wise et al., 2004), and perceived and actual learning (Hostetter & Busch, 2013; Kang & Im, 2013).

Student-faculty interactions, which may be seen both as an element of faculty social presence and as a result of faculty social presence, have been found to have significant effects on student learning, such as in gains in general education, career preparation, and personal development (Astin, 1993; Lundberg et al., 2018). Astin's

theory of student involvement has provided the framework for other research that has found that online students who have fewer student-faculty interactions than do students in face-to-face classes had lower grades (Glazier, 2016), lower rates of retention (Glazier, 2016), decreased academic motivation (Trolan et al., 2016), and lower levels of development in cognitive skill (Kim & Lundberg, 2016). In a multiple-case study closely related to the current study, Richardson et al. (2015) explored instructor social presence in online graduate-level classes at a large, public, U.S. university; however, no students were interviewed to explore their perceptions of the faculty social presence in the course.

Chapter 2 includes a detailed discussion of the strategy used for searching for articles for the literature review and the conceptual framework based on the concept of faculty social presence. I also provide a review of current, empirical research related to the research problem and discuss how this study helped fill the gap in the research in this area.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I searched the following databases, accessed through the Walden University Library to conduct the literature review: Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ERIC, NCES Publications, ProQuest Central, and SAGE Journals (formerly SAGE Premier). Using the Thoreau Multi-Database Search and the ERIC and Education Source Combined Search, I performed multidatabase searches starting from the premise and continuing throughout the proposal process. The keyword search terms that I used were: *student learning in postsecondary education, student development in postsecondary education, academic success in postsecondary education, academic self-concept in*



*postsecondary students, challenges in online learning, student-faculty interactions in postsecondary education, student-faculty interactions, online student-faculty interactions, student-faculty interactions in distance education, faculty social presence, instructor social presence, and social presence.* I also subscribed to searches of research using these and other terms.

To find additional research on the topic, I used the references cited in the research articles reviewed. I repeated this process with the referenced articles to help add depth and breadth to my literature search. This strategy was especially useful in helping me recognize key researchers and concepts seen throughout the various studies with a variety of research problems and questions.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that I chose for this study of postsecondary students at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university focused on adult learners was Garrison's (2017) concept of social presence, which views social presence as how individuals identify with others in a group, communicate intentionally when they feel they can trust the environment, and develop relationships with others in the group by establishing themselves through their own personalities.

Social presence has many definitions in the literature depending on the point of view of the researchers, and the term is still evolving (Richardson et al., 2017; Swan, 2017). The definitions and conceptual frameworks vary depending on the interests of the researcher, with some focused on how students and faculty communicate through different technological mediums where the various technologies are the focus, and other

definitions focused on such areas as social interaction, intimacy, immediacy, and connectedness (Richardson et al., 2017; Swan, 2017). Richardson et al. (2017) listed 16 definitions that have been used and still are used in some cases to define social presence. Swan (2017) said there are dozens and noted that Garrison's (2017) most recent definition includes elements of those of significant researchers in the field from Short et al.'s (1976) definition to Gunawardena's (1995) definition, Garrison et al.'s (2000) definition, Tu and McIsaac's (2002) definition, and Picciano's (2002) definition.

After reviewing the focus of all the definitions, I considered the research questions and goals for the study to decide on the most appropriate conceptual framework, similar to how I chose the research approach. Because this study of the perceptions of postsecondary students about faculty social presence in their online gateway classes at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university addressed adult learners and the postsecondary students' perceptions of the effects of the faculty social presence on their learning, I decided that Garrison's (2017) definition of social presence most closely related to the research questions. Garrison's focus on the participants rather than the technology used seemed especially relevant. While this concept of social presence can be used as a framework to explore individuals' perceptions of social presence for both faculty and students, I focused on the students' perceptions of the social presence of their professors and how the students perceived that this social presence affected their learning in this study.

Garrison et al. (2000) researched social presence through several lenses, including as a component in a community of inquiry where cognitive presence, social presence, and

teaching presence combine to create a successful experience in higher education. In this perspective, social presence differs from teaching presence and the focus is on not just how the professor demonstrates their presence in an online class but instead on how the students and professor act and interact. In the community of inquiry framework, cognitive presence, the first component, can be seen as the students' interest and desire to know followed by students' learning and assimilating that knowledge into understanding. Social presence, the second component of this perspective, involves open expression where students communicate without being afraid that the professor and others will disparage their thoughts, expression of emotions, and cohesion of the group. Teaching presence, the third component of this approach, is demonstrated through classroom management, such as where the professor chooses and specifies the topics to be discussed, the building of understanding by sharing experiences from a personal perspective such as self-disclosure, and direct instruction by the professor. Although viewing social presence through the perspective of a community of inquiry can allow for important insights about faculty-student interactions in the classroom, social presence and teaching presence in that context are seen more as separate elements rather than as a combination of those elements, such as in studies that focus on faculty or instructor social presence outside the community of inquiry model.

As Garrison (2019) argued, most postsecondary students do not distinguish between types of teaching, such as direct instruction, and the kind of facilitation specified by a community of inquiry framework. From a student's perspective especially, the three components of a community of inquiry framework are closely related (Garrison, 2019).

Garrison's conceptual framework seems appropriate to view faculty social presence in a study like mine where the focus was on the students' perspectives of the faculty social presence and how they perceived that the faculty social presence affected their learning from the broader perspective.

In the context of learning environments, Garrison (2017) argued that demonstrating faculty social presence in a university or other academic setting means establishing a learning environment where opposing views are welcomed and openly discussed without fear. From this perspective, social presence is not demonstrated only through traditional or casual social interactions or engagement, such as in everyday polite society or being social for the sake of being social; instead, faculty social presence is intended to create a foundation conducive to the purpose of student learning. In this way, faculty social presence may be viewed as how students perceive their professors in terms of being available and approachable for a professional, not merely social, purpose of helping the students learn about the subject (Garrison, 2017).

Garrison (2017) contended that this distinction between a strictly social relationship and one that is developed as part of a specific purpose, such as meeting the academic goals for a class, is essential because the participants in an academic setting need to feel comfortable in expressing skepticism about a topic or point, asking for further explanation, and contributing varying viewpoints in the class. If students perceive the student-faculty relationship as merely social, they might not want to risk upsetting the professor or other students by asking difficult questions or sharing their dissenting views (Garrison, 2017).

Just as a balance is needed between the social and the academic aspects of social presence, the type of social presence exhibited should align with the specific academic task and course (Garrison, 2017). In other words, just as every class may be viewed as having its own personality, the range of strategies demonstrated by the faculty member to establish faculty social presence in a given situation may vary depending on the needs of a specific class. Similarly, some students may want and prefer different types and amounts of faculty social presence than other students do (Garrison, 2017). From that perspective, exploring the perceptions of individual postsecondary students, such as in this basic qualitative research study, may provide useful insights. In the current study, the conceptual framework and the research questions helped guide the formation of the interview questions and the interpretation of the results.

### **Literature Review of Empirical Studies Associated With the Research Problem**

This empirical literature review consists of sections on research regarding (a) postsecondary students' learning and development in face-to-face classes related to student-faculty interactions and faculty social presence, (b) postsecondary students' learning and development in online classes related to student-faculty interactions and faculty social presence, and (c) online instructional practices related to faculty social presence and student-faculty interactions.

### **Postsecondary Students' Learning and Development in Face-to-Face Classes**

Many research studies into the learning and development of postsecondary students have been conducted with students attending school in traditional, face-to-face settings. I grouped my discussion of these studies into research on cognitive skills,

academic self-concept, and academic motivation, followed by research on the effects of student-faculty interactions on different student populations.

***Cognitive Skills, Academic Self-Concept, and Academic Motivation***

Astin (1993, 1999), the researcher once cited most often in the field of higher education with self-citations excluded (Budd & Magnuson, 2010) and the author of the theory of involvement, argued that while student learning and development in postsecondary education often is assessed through the lens of grades, there is much more to consider than just those grades. When students were asked about their perceived growth in themselves after 4 years in college in a national survey, the growth in knowledge in the main area of study had the highest reported increase (60.5%), with the increase in general knowledge in the second-highest spot (49.3%; Astin, 1993). Over 4 years, there was a perceived 38.8% increase in critical-thinking skills and 37% increase in interpersonal skills (Astin, 1993, p. 223).

Postsecondary students' cognitive skills related to student-faculty interactions have been previously explored in studies with a large national database, such as the study by Kim and Lundberg (2016). Based on data from the 2010 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey of 5,169 senior students from 10 college campuses, Kim and Lundberg controlled for the students' self-reported cognitive skills at the start of school and other variables that can affect cognitive development. The researchers found increased levels of perceived cognitive skills among college students who reported more interactions with faculty compared to those who reported fewer student-faculty interactions. Kim and Lundberg also found that interactions between students and faculty

indirectly affected the development of cognitive skills, mediated by the students' reported engagement in the classroom setting. Increased levels of student-faculty interaction were associated with students who reported that they interacted more and engaged more frequently in critical reasoning in the classroom; in turn, the increased level of engagement by the students in the classroom was associated with increased levels of cognitive development (Kim & Lundberg, 2016).

Studies have been conducted regarding the effects of student-faculty interaction in face-to-face classes related to students' cognitive abilities (Astin, 1993; Kim & Lundberg, 2016), academic self-concept (Kim & Sax, 2014; Zhan & Mei, 2013), and students' levels of motivation (Trolan et al., 2016; Trolan & Parker, 2017). Other studies of postsecondary students in face-to-face environments have focused on the effects of student-faculty interactions in different populations of postsecondary students such as Latinx students; students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (Garvey et al., 2018); commuter students (Dwyer, 2017); and students with different majors (Kim & Sax, 2014).

Related to cognitive skills, the effects of student-faculty interactions have been found to have a significant, positive relationship with postsecondary students' academic self-concept or belief in one's capacity for academic learning (Kim & Sax, 2014). Kim and Sax (2014) found increased levels of academic self-concept in students at the end of 4 years of college after controlling for the students' levels of academic self-concept when they first entered the college 4 years earlier. The higher levels of academic self-concept were found in students who reported asking a faculty member for advice outside the

classroom, challenging the faculty members' ideas during class, and visiting the home of a faculty member, with the strongest positive effect found in students who reported challenging a professor's ideas in class (Kim & Sax, 2014).

Multiple researchers have found that student-faculty interactions affected the academic motivation of postsecondary students (Purarjomandlangrudi & Chen, 2019; Trolan et al., 2016; Trolan & Parker, 2017). Trolan et al. (2016) found evidence of student-faculty interactions that increased students' motivation using data from a multi-institution, multiyear, longitudinal Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS) study of college outcomes that included undergraduate students from 17 4-year colleges and universities in 11 different states and four regions of the United States. Trolan et al. found that increased levels of students' perceptions of the quality of their interactions with their professors, the frequency of their interactions with their professors, the time they spent working on research with faculty, personal conversations between the students and their professors, and student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom resulted in increases in students' levels of academic motivation. When the individual measures were combined into a single model, two of the five items (the quality of the student-faculty interactions and the frequency of the student-faculty interactions) remained statistically significant for both men and women (Trolan et al., 2016).

The positive effects of the frequency of student-faculty interactions on academic motivation found in Trolan et al.'s study (2016) also were found in Trolan and Parker's (2017) study that explored the relationship between different types of student-faculty interactions of college students over 4 years of college and the aspirations of the students



to earn a graduate or professional degree. The data used were from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education from 30 liberal-arts colleges, nine regional universities, and seven research universities from across the United States. Trolian and Parker found that three types of student-faculty interactions made it more likely that students would aspire to further their educations to earn a graduate or professional degree: how often the students interacted with faculty outside the classroom, the students' perceived quality of the student-faculty interactions, and whether the students worked on research with a professor. When all the student-faculty interaction measures were combined into a single model, the frequency of the student-faculty interactions and the experience of working on research with a professor remained statistically significant (Trolian & Parker, 2017).

### ***Effects of Student-Faculty Interactions on Different Student Populations***

Other research studies focused on the positive effects of student-faculty interactions on specific populations, including Latinx students (Lundberg et al., 2018), LGBT students (Garvey et al., 2018), commuter students (Dwyer, 2017), and students in different majors (Kim & Sax, 2014). In one such study, Latinx postsecondary students (Lundberg et al., 2018) were the focus exploring the effects of student-faculty interactions on students' perceptions of their learning. Based on data from the national database of the 2013 Community College Survey of Student Engagement, Lundberg et al. (2018) included 10,071 Latinx students from 108 community colleges with 5,793 women and 4,278 men represented. Lundberg et al. (2018) assessed student-faculty interactions, based in part on the students' perceptions of the frequency of six types of possible interactions: how often the students perceived that they received feedback promptly from

their professors, talked about their assignments or grades, discussed their career plans, talked outside of the classroom, worked hard to meet their professors' expectations, and worked with their professors on items other than the class activities. A seventh measure was based on students' perceptions of how available, helpful, and sympathetic their professors. Lundberg et al. found that all seven measures had significant influences on the students' perceptions of their learning. The two strongest predictors of students' perceptions of increased learning were how driven the students were to meet their professors' expectations and the availability of the faculty to the students.

Similar results showing the positive effects of student-faculty interactions have been found in the relationship between high-impact educational practices and student-faculty interactions for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (LGBQ) students in higher education. Garvey et al. (2018) reviewed data obtained in the 2014 NSSE. Garvey et al. found few differences in the amounts and types of participation in high-impact academic practices between the students who self-identified as LGBQ, those who self-identified as heterosexual, and those who did not want to reply. While no significant differences were found in first-year students between heterosexual students and students who declined to respond about their sexual orientation, a difference was seen in senior students who said that they did not want to reply about their sexual orientation compared to the heterosexual students. A major finding was that the LGBQ students who reported more interactions with faculty participated significantly more often in high-impact practices than the LGBQ students who reported fewer interactions with faculty. In addition, students who reported

feeling disconnected from faculty participated in fewer high-impact practices than those who felt more connected to faculty.

Student-faculty interactions also were reported to positively affect persistence in a study of commuter students (Dwyer, 2017). In that study, Dwyer (2017) found a moderately positive correlation between high levels of student-faculty interaction and the students' reported intent to continue their educations at the university. In focus groups, most of the students who said that the student-faculty classroom interactions had influenced them positively said that the positive effects were related to their intellectual or academic pursuits (Dwyer, 2017).

Adding further insight into student-faculty interactions, researchers Kim and Sax (2014) found that the amount and type of student-faculty interactions in a college or university setting varied by the students' majors. For example, students majoring in fields related to the arts, language, and literature reported having asked a professor a question outside of class, having been mentored by a professor, or visiting a professor's home more often than students who were majoring in other fields (Kim & Sax, 2014). While students majoring in business administration and finance were found to challenge their professors' ideas in class more often than students in other majors did, students in these and other majors were found to spend less time talking with their professors outside of the classroom or office hours than those with majors in the arts, literature, and language (Kim & Sax, 2014). The business and financial majors who reported spending the least amount of time talking with their professors outside of class and office hours also reported being the least satisfied with their interactions with their faculty and with their

access to faculty outside of the classroom (Kim & Sax, 2014). Conversely, the students who reported spending the most time talking with their faculty outside of the classroom and office areas--those studying the arts, languages, and literature--reported being the most satisfied with their access to their faculty and with the student-faculty interactions (Kim & Sax, 2014).

### **Postsecondary Students' Learning and Development in Online Classes**

Although more studies have been done to explore the learning and development of postsecondary students in face-to-face classes than those in online classes due to the longer history of traditional, face-to-face classes, as the number of online postsecondary classes have increased, research into the online learning and development of postsecondary students has increased as well. In this section I discuss studies related to online students' cognitive skills, academic self-concept, and academic motivation, which I organized similarly to the previous section on these academic gains for students in face-to-face classrooms.

Similar to Trolan et al.'s (2016) findings on the positive effects of frequent postsecondary student-faculty interactions in a face-to-face setting on the students' levels of academic motivation, Purarjomandlangrudi and Chen (2019) found that online students' perceptions of how involved their professors were in the class influenced the students' involvement and interactions in their classes. For example, a lack of quick, real-time feedback to the students in the discussion forums was a factor in decreased student motivation and involvement in those forums.

Positive effects as a result of student-faculty interactions have also been found among graduate students. Watson et al. (2017) found that the strategies that master's-level online students reported as helping them learn most successfully were those related to student-faculty interactions. Most effective were the professors' availability and responsiveness to the students, the professors' willingness to interact and engage with the students, and the efforts made by the faculty to encourage communication and interactions.

Based on their study using data from 300,543 first-year students and seniors from the 2015 NSSE, Dumford and Miller (2018) found the more online classes that students took, the more engaged the students were. Dumford and Miller suggested that the findings indicated that online learning might promote activities requiring quantitative reasoning and engagement, while face-to-face classes might encourage and promote collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, effective teaching practices, quality interactions, and discussions with diverse others.

The research itself has been scattered across disciplines, contexts, and measures of social presence (Richardson et al., 2017). While researchers have found that social presence affected online postsecondary students' motivation, participation, actual and perceived learning to retention, and their satisfaction with their professors and classes. Richardson et al. (2017) in their literature review claimed that identifying patterns among the studies was difficult. To address that gap, Richardson et al. conducted a meta-analysis of research published from 1992 to 2015 on social presence related to online postsecondary students' levels of satisfaction and learning. The 25 studies that met those

criteria included a total of 3,051 online postsecondary students in the research on social presence and students' perceived levels of learning and another 3,862 online postsecondary students in research into social presence and student satisfaction. The results showed a strong positive correlation between social presence and both the satisfaction and perceived levels of learning of online postsecondary students. Richardson et al. concluded that social presence was important in student satisfaction and perceived learning as essential student outcomes and argued that social presence could help students develop their skills in critical thinking and higher-level thinking.

The effects of instructor social presence on online students' levels of achievement, satisfaction, and the students' social presence were explored further in a mixed-method study that also focused on identifying effective methods of faculty social presence (Oyarzun et al., 2018). While Oyarzun et al. (2018) found a positive trend in student achievement and satisfaction, and learner social presence in association with faculty social presence, these findings were not statistically significant. In research using the related concept of teaching presence, Zhu et al. (2019) found that students reported positive effects on their perceived levels of learning as a result of their professors' presence and interactions with them in online discussion forums and activities in their online classes. Similar to the findings of Oyarzun et al. of increased student satisfaction related to faculty social presence, Zhu et al. reported higher perceived levels of student satisfaction associated with increased faculty presence. Using a different approach, Park and Kim (2020) explored the effects of an interactive communication tool system, Microsoft Teams, in the classroom as an optional way for students to connect and interact

with the professor privately on the perceptions of postsecondary students in an online statistics class of the instructor's social presence. The researchers found that the students' perceptions of increased faculty presence in the class were associated with increased student engagement and satisfaction (Park & Kim, 2020).

Based on their research exploring another aspect of student learning and development in online postsecondary students' academic self-concept, Ajmal and Rafique (2018) reported a strong positive relationship between the online students' academic self-concept and their levels of academic achievement. The relationship was stronger for the 427 graduate-level students than for the 373 undergraduate postsecondary students. In another study, Zhan and Mei (2013) explored the effects of academic self-concept and student social presence on student learning and student satisfaction in postsecondary students in an online course compared to students in a face-to-face version of the same course. Half of the 257 surveyed undergraduate postsecondary students in a digital design course were assigned randomly to an online class while the rest of the students were placed in a face-to-face version of the course. The researchers found no significant differences in the levels of academic self-concept of the students in the online version of the class compared to those of the students in the face-to-face version of the class (Zhan & Mei, 2013). While the students in the face-to-face sections of the course reported feeling higher levels of social presence in the class than the students in the online version did, Zhan and Mei found higher levels of the effects of social presence were more associated with the learning and satisfaction of the students in the online class than for those in the face-to-face class. Zhan and Mei argued that the results showed that

the online postsecondary students needed more supports related to their social interactions in classes including with their professors.

Other studies have found that increased faculty social presence affected the perceptions of the professors regarding their students' levels of learning and success. Oyarzun et al. (2018) found that professors who demonstrated high levels of faculty social presence perceived their students as having achieved higher levels of academic growth than professors who exhibited lower levels of social presence (Oyarzun et al., 2018). Similarly, Richardson et al. (2016) found that the professors in that study felt that their social presence in their online classes increased their students' levels of success. Faculty in that study felt that the increase in student success was related to specific aspects of the professors' social presence in the classes such as the professors' levels of approachability, how the professors showed the students that they were interested in the students' success, and the professors' expertise in the subject (Richardson et al., 2016). The study also found that professors believed that demonstrating social presence through their own participation and engagement was important to the students' success even if an individual professor did not believe that exhibiting faculty social presence was necessary (Richardson et al., 2016).

### **Strategies Used to Increase Faculty Social Presence in Online Classes**

This section of the empirical literature review addresses strategies explored in research to increase faculty social presence in online postsecondary classes. I discuss studies related to the importance of considering context when choosing strategies to increase faculty social presence in online postsecondary classes, strategies to help



students and faculty get to know each other as individuals, and the use of online feedback to increase faculty social presence.

### ***Context Matters in Choosing Strategies to Support Online Faculty Social Presence***

Although one might assume that it is easier to convey social presence in a face-to-face learning context than in an online setting, Dilling et al. (2020) found no statistically significant differences between the perceptions of community-college students in face-to-face classes compared to those of the students taking the same online courses regarding faculty social presence in their courses. While Dilling et al. argued that, based on the results of their study, equally strong levels of faculty social presence can be found in online and face-to-face learning environments, they noted that the design and delivery components of the course in the study may have affected the results.

As discussed throughout this study, different researchers including Dilling et al. (2020), Garrison (2017), Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018), Oyarzun et al. (2018), Richardson and Lowenthal (2017), and Robb and Sutton (2014) have focused their studies based on a variety of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, courses, and classroom elements that might affect faculty social presence with an array of findings and perspectives. The wide range of possible strategies, tools, and techniques that professors may use in attempts to increase their faculty social presence presents questions not only about the methods themselves but also about the effectiveness of a given method in different settings and classes and with different students and professors (Garrison, 2017; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). Garrison argued that understanding the effects of online instructional practices requires focusing not on the techniques or tools themselves but

instead on the effects on the particular students in a certain set of circumstances (Garrison, 2017).

The individual differences and preferences of the students, professors, and class specifics are especially important when considering the many possible technological methods of the communication process itself (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). In one study, Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) offered 24 technology-based methods for the postsecondary students to interact with the professors from more common methods such as through email and in telephone conversations to collaborative music projects, Twitter, online Google activities, and more. Students rated the 24 methods in terms of how much they felt a given item increased their perceptions of the instructor's social presence. Overall, the students chose detailed online feedback on their assignments, individualized emails, and how-to videos as their methods that they felt most increased the instructor's social presence from the students' perspectives (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). The same students rated student-faculty interactions using Twitter; an online, collaborative activity in Google related to a list of design guidelines; and an online question-answering service called Just Ask Zoltar as the least effective of the 24 technological methods used in the class in terms of increasing faculty social perspective from the students' perspectives (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). To paraphrase researchers' suggestions and findings, the answer to the question of what the most effective strategies and techniques to establish faculty social presence in online classes are, is that it depends (Garrison, 2017; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018).

One common theme in the discussions and conclusions of these studies has been

the need for course designers and faculty to consider the context of the individual courses (Dilling et al., 2020; Garrison, 2017; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Oyarzun et al., 2018, Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017; Robb & Sutton, 2014). As researchers have noted, however, for course designers to be able to consider the context of a course related to increasing faculty social presence in the class, they must be informed about faculty social presence and the positive differences that increased faculty social presence can make to online learners (Oyarzun et al., 2018; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017).

If course designers have not included features to enhance that social presence in the design of a course, several researchers suggested that online faculty may want to try strategies based on the existing research into faculty social presence including Glazier (2016), Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018), Oyarzun et al. (2018), Richardson and Lowenthal (2017), and Robb and Sutton (2014).

In contrast to research focused on specific strategies and methods, other researchers have offered broader approaches to exploring faculty social presence in online courses. Dumford and Miller (2018), for example, offered a more general approach to understanding how to increase faculty social presence in online classes. Based on their study using data from 300,543 first-year students and seniors from the 2015 NSSE, Dumford and Miller found that the more online classes students took, the more engaged the students were. These findings, they argued, indicated that online learning might promote activities requiring quantitative reasoning and engagement, while face-to-face classes might encourage and promote collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, effective teaching practices, quality interactions, and discussions with

diverse others (Dumford & Miller, 2018).

***Strategies to Help Students and Faculty Get to Know Each Other as Individuals***

Another strategy referenced prominently in the literature focuses on practices intended to help students and instructors get to know each other as individuals with preferences and personalities, practices that can help increase faculty social presence as discussed by Garrison (2017) and Richardson et al. (2017). Dumford and Miller (2018) also suggested that quality of student interactions, collaborative learning, and discussions with diverse others could be strengthened if students and faculty spent more time getting to know each other and sharing more about their personal backgrounds in the online format. While it may seem incongruous that focusing on basic human practices of getting to know others as individuals can help enhance learning that is accomplished through complex technology, technology from this perspective is more of a means to an end rather than the central element itself. Purarjomandlangrudi and Chen (2019) found that functional, reliable technology that the students could use readily was more important to student involvement than new or interesting technology alone was. By itself, innovative or state-of-the-art technology did not ensure that students would be highly involved in the course.

Studies have explored the effects of various techniques to increase student-faculty interactions in online classes in ways to demonstrate increased faculty social presence including increasing faculty social presence through displaying the professor's personality using bios (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017), photographs (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Richardson et al., 2017), faculty videos

(Glazier, 2016), individualized feedback (Glazier, 2016; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018), discussion posts (Hoey, 2017; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018), motivational emails (Robb & Sutton, 2014), an in-class social-media platform (Quong et al., 2018); asynchronous videos on classroom activities (Bialowas & Steimel, 2019), and discussion-forum feedback and asynchronous videos (Thomas et al., 2017). In specific, some research studies have explored increasing the professor's social presence by demonstrating their persona or personality through such techniques as the professor emailing and posting a bio in the classroom that extends beyond their educational credentials and instead includes facets of the professor's hobbies or interests beyond the classroom (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). Another technique involved the professor posting a photograph of himself or herself (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Richardson et al., 2017) such as while engaged in a favorite activity. Other strategies have included creating a welcome announcement or email for students that goes beyond the institutional details of the class and shows aspects of the professor's personality (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). While these techniques involve sharing details about one's personal life, Garrison (2017) was clear that how faculty social presence is demonstrated in an online class should be adjusted based on the specific circumstances of the class, from the professor to the course subject matter and levels to the students. In other words, as discussed earlier, context and personal preferences matter when faculty consider what techniques they may use to share more about who the professors are as individuals to students in a course (Garrison, 2017).

To explore the effects of faculty building rapport with the professor's online postsecondary students related to improved student success based on students' grades and retention rates, Glazier (2016) used various techniques in a mixed-methods study that included a rapport group and a control group that did not receive the rapport treatment. Specific techniques used in the rapport group included welcome and weekly update videos that demonstrated the professor's personality, links to pertinent YouTube videos; and extensive and individualized feedback including handwritten notes created using Adobe Acrobat Pro; and personalized emails. These techniques were not used in the nonrapport condition of the study. Students in the rapport condition reported feeling that their professor was accessible and interested in the class and students; they also had higher grades and increased retention rates than the students in the nonrapport group. Since no significant differences in how positively the students in the two conditions viewed the course itself were found, Glazier argued that the improved outcomes resulted from the rapport building.

Discussion posts that were deemed conversational as a result of the instructor mentioning aspects of their life or commenting on elements of students' lives based on the students' posts significantly improved the students' perceptions about the course quality, the quality of the professor, and the students' overall view of the course along with a small effect on the students' perceptions of their achievements (Hoey, 2017, p. 277). Hoey (2017) concluded that the conversational posts increased the professor's social presence or relatability by revealing their personality, character, or perspective about situations and events. Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) also found that sharing

personal aspects of their lives in asynchronous discussion forums helped increase their faculty social presence in their online classes. In addition to disclosing information about themselves such as about their philosophies and hobbies, through introductory emails and posts, the professors emphasized their availability to the students through a variety of mediums. Students were encouraged to share about themselves using video, asynchronous discussion forums, Twitter, and music with the professors responding (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018).

As a method of demonstrating faculty social presence with less personal self-disclosure, motivational emails were found in another study to enhance faculty social presence in online classes and improve student performance (Robb & Sutton, 2014). A series of motivational emails were sent to one group of students at specific points in the class such as before midterms; the control group of students did not receive these messages. Findings from the study included positive effects on student motivation, course completion, and grades with the students who received the series of motivational emails compared to students in the control group (Robb & Sutton, 2014).

Technology is, of course, essential in executing online classes, and the wide variety of technological applications can be used in various combinations to meet the needs and preferences of faculty and students in a course. Applications and built-in programs such as online discussion forums, self-contained blogs and chat forums within an online classroom, instant messaging, and in-course webcam recording systems provide options and a framework for the classroom activities and student-faculty interactions. For example, Quong et al. (2018) found that an in-class social-media platform allowed online

students and faculty to interact in ways that the students perceived as conducive to their learning. Using a social-media platform contained in the classroom that resembled well-known social-media platforms found outside of school, students and faculty could interact in familiar, social-type ways as they focused on the learning goals of the course (Quong et al., 2018).

In a simpler manner, typical discussion forums used in online classes allow opportunities for student-faculty interactions and faculty social presence as well. The effects of faculty presence in online discussion forums were explored in a study by Hoey (2017), who found that the perceptions of online education graduate students about the quality of the instructor, the course, how much they learned, and their achievements were influenced positively by the type, rather than the quantity, of student-faculty interactions on the class discussion forums. When faculty made discussion posts that were deemed instructional as a result of the professor adding to the content or resources to help advance student understanding, students' perceptions of their progress on the learning outcomes were higher than those reported for posts that focused on encouraging students, promoting the discussion, or summarizing the discussion.

Collins et al. (2019) found in a quantitative study, however, that using technology to communicate about classroom activities to students in the form of asynchronous video did not increase the students' perceptions of faculty social presence compared to the use of text-based messages. Moreover, students in the study who were given information about the course through text-based messages participated more often in discussion forums than students who were informed about class activities through asynchronous



videos (Collins et al., 2019). Based on their results from a qualitative study of postsecondary students in communication classes, however, Bialowas and Steimel (2019) found that students perceived asynchronous videos as enhancing the sense of instructor social presence in a course. At the same time, the students reported feeling as though too many videos in a brief period such as over a week might decrease their levels of motivation; the students also felt that asynchronous videos directed to the entire class increased their levels of motivation and their sense of the instructor's involvement and presence more than asynchronous videos that were directed to the individual students did (Bialowas & Steimel, 2019).

### ***The Use of Online Feedback to Increase Faculty Social Presence***

Beyond conversational posts and casual student-faculty interactions, other researchers explored the effects of online feedback on increasing faculty social presence in postsecondary classes (Glazier, 2016; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) explored the use of detailed, individualized faculty feedback as a way to enhance faculty social presence. Depending on the class, the professor's preferences, and the available technology, feedback to students can be facilitated in online classes in a variety of ways, from comments made on downloaded copies of papers that then are scanned and uploaded into the classroom for students, to feedback provided directly on the documents uploaded in the classroom via computer-generated comments and annotations to video and audio feedback or combinations of these techniques. Lowenthal and Dunlap found that the students felt that the detailed, individualized feedback, opportunities to get to know the professors and others in the class better as individuals,

and the accessibility of the professor were the factors they found most helpful in terms of faculty social presence as a method of improving the students' learning. Lowenthal and Dunlap concluded that no specific technique or technology stood out as a way to enhance faculty social presence in the class; instead, what mattered most was how the activity helped the students achieve a certain learning goal (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018).

In other research, Thomas et al. (2017) analyzed feedback given to online postsecondary students through online text and asynchronous video feedback for instructor social presence. The 167 undergraduate education students were enrolled in technology classes that required students to use video communication tools through an online LMS, Canvas, and to use instructor feedback to improve their assignments. Before the classes began, the instructors were given information about elements that could increase instructor social presence in the feedback, including using the students' names, welcoming the students, commenting on things that the instructors had in common with the students based on the students' self-disclosures, offering to help the students, and looking at the webcam when making video feedback (Thomas et al., 2017). The instructors provided both online text feedback and asynchronous video feedback to the students for projects in the course; the feedback from the three major assignments in the course were analyzed for the frequency of examples of instructor social presence like those that had been shared with the professors earlier. Thomas et al. found similar numbers of examples of faculty social presence in the online text feedback and the asynchronous video feedback and noted that the quality of the instances of instructor social presence was not considered.

## Summary

In this chapter I discussed and analyzed empirical literature related to my research problem. I also discussed the conceptual framework in more depth. Almost every research article about faculty social presence I reviewed included mention of the many definitions that have been and still are used in attempts to define social presence. I concluded that this concept simply was relevant in a multitude of ways and research questions.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and the methodology for the study including the participant selection logic; the instrumentation; the procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; and the data analysis. I also address issues of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in Chapter 3.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore postsecondary students' perceptions of faculty social presence in their online gateway courses at a 4-year, private, non-profit, Midwestern U.S. university that focuses on adult learners and to explore how the postsecondary students perceived the faculty social presence affected their learning. In this chapter, I discuss the research design and rationale; the role of the researcher; and the methodology including the participant selection logic; the instrumentation; the procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; and the data analysis plan. I also address issues of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter concludes with a summary.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do postsecondary students at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university in the U.S. Midwest that focuses on adult learners perceive faculty social presence in their online gateway classes?

RQ2: How do postsecondary students at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university in the U.S. Midwest that focuses on adult learners perceive faculty social presence in their online gateway classes as affecting their learning?

I used a basic qualitative research design for this study. This research approach was chosen based on considerations including the research questions and the conceptual framework based on the concept of social presence (see Garrison, 2017). The concept of social presence as defined by Garrison (2017) guided the formation of interview

questions and interpretation of results. The focus of interest was postsecondary students' perceptions of faculty social presence in their online classes and their perceptions of how the faculty social presence affected their learning in those online courses.

The nature of this study was qualitative, and I employed a basic descriptive research design (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this type of research study, the researcher focuses on understanding how the participants in the study perceive a situation, process, event, or phenomenon and the meaning that the participants assign to their perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through that exploration, the researcher can gain an understanding of the worldviews and perspectives of the study participants themselves (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, in a basic qualitative research study, an inductive strategy is used and the researcher serves as the instrument; as the name implies, the outcome of this study describes the phenomenon as seen through the views of the participants. With this type of study, the researcher seeks to explore and understand based on the data collected in the study rather than to verify a preconceived idea or hypothesis.

To obtain thick, rich data, the researcher in a basic qualitative study typically employs interviews, document analyses, or a combination of these techniques (Patton, 2015). From the data obtained, patterns may emerge, helping the researcher understand the participants' experiences from their perspectives and worldviews. In other words, a basic qualitative descriptive research study seeks to see what is there, not to see what the researcher or others may expect. This perspective of open-minded exploration aligns with Patton's (2015) pragmatic view that basic qualitative research studies can be used to gain

practical knowledge that then can be used by the researcher or others to better understand or improve a situation. Here again, the goal is to understand others' experiences as they perceive them rather than to confirm what some may expect or wish to find.

I considered a case study approach, with its focus on understanding or describing a unique or unusual instance or issue and multiple data sources, such as interviews, documentation, and observational data (see Creswell, 2016; Patton, 2015). While interviews could be conducted with the participants, direct observations of the student-faculty interactions in real time might have been impractical because the participants might not have lived nearby or might not have had the time for that type of study. Observing a synchronous class might have also disrupted the usual sense of faculty presence. Furthermore, acquiring records of their online class activities would have involved further permissions and risks to confidentiality aspects beyond the constraints of this dissertation study. As a result, a case study did not seem to be the most suitable choice for this study.

I decided against using a narrative inquiry, with its focus on the story and making meaning of that story (see Creswell, 2016; Patton, 2015) because my goal was to explore postsecondary students' perceptions of faculty social presence in their online gateway (i.e., entry) classes and how the students perceived that faculty social presence as having affected their learning based on the students' remembered experiences from one or more online courses rather than as a continuum or narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. In other words, I believed the focus of this study was not to create a timeline and full story but instead to explore students' perceptions of faculty social presence as it occurred

within the course and the students' perceptions of how that faculty social presence affected their learning.

I decided against ethnography and autoethnography because of their focus on culture and the participant-observer and field work aspects (see Patton, 2015). As much as possible, I did not want to be part of these students' experiences, which was one reason I excluded past or present students of mine from the study. The field work required for those types of research approaches also would not have worked well within the current study because the online students I planned to recruit to participate in this study could have lived anywhere with internet access (see Patton, 2015).

The terms *describe*, *explore*, *experience*, and *meaning* that are characteristic of the basic qualitative inquiry research approach, particularly *explore*, were all words that aligned with the information that I wanted to find out through the current study (see Creswell, 2016; Patton, 2015). In addition, the element of possibly learning practical knowledge is a feature of this research approach as well as my hope for the study so this approach again seemed to be an appropriate fit for the current research (see Creswell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Since the research questions should drive the approach, not the other way around (Patton, 2015), a basic qualitative research approach seemed to be the most suitable design for this study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My interest in this subject is related to my experiences over the past 15 years as a university professor and former department chair in predominantly online settings. While I have worked full-time for two online universities, I also have taught and continue to

teach for multiple other postsecondary institutions, almost entirely online as I prefer because I feel that online education offers important opportunities for individuals who otherwise could not attend college. As Patton (2015) cautioned, it is important for the researcher to look for and acknowledge biases throughout a research study. Accordingly, I understand that while my experience teaching online and in higher education overall is useful in providing me with insights into the process and operations involved in online teaching and learning, that experience also could have resulted in biases that could affect my research design, the interview process, the analysis, and my interpretation of findings (see Patton, 2015). To help guard against the effects of such biases during the interviews and the data analysis, I stayed aware of my biases and kept a journal of my perceptions throughout those processes.

Another possible ethical issue associated with my study was that I have worked for the university that I selected for this study for several years as an online adjunct professor on an as-needed, course-by-course basis. I also assisted by interviewing participants on a research project conducted by others at the university in 2020. To prevent possible biases, I did not select student participants who currently had or ever have had me as a professor or whom I interviewed for the research project conducted by others at the university. In addition, although I was not aware of anyone whom I knew personally taking classes at this university, if I had recognized any name among the students, I would not have selected that person for the study. Similarly, if any prospective participant had said they knew me, I would not have included that individual in the study.



Because the school had thousands of students from all over the United States, I did not anticipate that occurring and it did not.

This university encourages scholarly research and was willing to have me collect data there. Throughout my years working for the university, all my interactions with my supervisors and the university administrators have been professional and everyone has been respectful of each other's boundaries. As a result, and because this university promotes scholarly research, I did not anticipate any issues with conflicts of interest or power differentials, and none occurred.

I also did not anticipate any issues with bias related to the professors who taught the participants selected for the study. It was unlikely that I ever would have had contact with any professor that a participant might mention. The university has many adjunct professors from all over the country who taught the online postsecondary entry (i.e., gateway) classes, and I know none of them as far as I am aware. None of the participants identified their professors in this study.

### **Methodology**

In this section, I describe the population; identify and justify the sampling strategy; and discuss the criteria that I used to select participants, how I decided that participants met the criteria, and the planned number of participants along with the rationale for that number. I also discuss the specific procedures that I used to identify, contact, and recruit the participants as well as the relationship between saturation and sample size.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

In this basic qualitative inquiry research study, I used purposeful sampling in an effort to learn from participants who had personal experience with the phenomenon, which was faculty social presence in the postsecondary students' online undergraduate classes at a 4-year, private, nonprofit, Midwestern U.S. university focused on adult learners (see Patton, 2015). After ensuring that the participants met the following inclusion criteria, I selected them on a first-come, first-accepted basis.

- The participants were postsecondary students who were over the age of 18 and had completed at least one fully online gateway (i.e., entry) undergraduate class at the school, not including hybrid classes (recognizing that this university offered both online and face-to-face classes and some students took both types of classes) since January 2019 in any field of study.
- The students could have attended part time or full time and could have been studying any field and in any year in the 4-year university.
- The online classes taken by the students could have been any of the gateway (i.e., entry) classes as listed by the university.
- Participants could not be students in the classes that I was teaching for the university at the time of the study and could not have had me as a professor in the past.
- Participants could not have been interviewed by me as part of an earlier research study conducted by others at the university.

## **Sample Size**

As discussed by Patton (2015), determining the sample size for a qualitative study depends on the context and the parameters (p. 314). The focus of a qualitative study like this one was on exploring the perspectives of the participants regarding their experiences rather than on obtaining generalizable results as with a quantitative research study (see Patton, 2015). As a result, the number of participants needed for this study was smaller than the sample size that would be needed in a quantitative research study (see Patton, 2015). At the same time, as Patton noted, the sample size must be large enough to allow for a range of participant perspectives.

Parameters that I considered in establishing the proposed number of participants included my intention to focus more on depth than on breadth, the need to complete the study within a reasonable amount of time for a doctoral study, and the importance of not obtaining a large number of interviews that would make analyzing the data beyond the scope of this type of dissertation study (see Patton, 2015). As discussed below in more detail, another consideration was the goal of achieving data saturation, the point at which no new data, themes, or codes were being identified in the study (see Guest et al., 2006). Guest et al. (2006) found that 94% of the high-frequency codes they identified in a study on saturation were found in the analysis of six interviews, with 97% of the high-frequency codes identified in the analysis of 12 interviews (p. 73). Although the perspectives and opinions of the participants varied, common themes occurred as a result of the similar experiences of the participants (Guest et al., 2006). The participants in the

current study all had completed at least one online (not hybrid) class at the same university and were asked the same set of questions.

Based on these factors, I chose a sample size of eight to 12 postsecondary students, which I felt would allow me to achieve data saturation. If data saturation had not occurred within the analysis of the 12 participants or if one or more participants had not completed the interview due to unanticipated scheduling issues on their part, I would have been able to recruit additional participants. I also planned for the possibility that data saturation might occur before I reached the 12th interview. In that case, for ethical reasons, I planned to cancel any remaining interviews that were scheduled and to give each of those individuals the promised \$25.00 gift card as compensation for their time since they had been willing to proceed. Planning for up to 12 participants in the study seemed likely to result in at least eight completed interviews from which to collect data for the study and likely to result in data saturation.

### **Participant Recruitment Details**

The community partner agreed to sort their student records to meet the parameters I gave them from this study and to email my invitation to participate in the study to the students. The students were directed to reply to me as noted in the invitation. The postsecondary students who were emailed the invitation to the study were those who had completed at least one fully online (not hybrid) class of the university's online gateway courses since January 2019. The gateway courses included classes in accounting, business, computers, English, finance, math, and others. I had not taught any of these gateway courses for this university and I was not scheduled to do so.

The invitations were sent to the students at one time. By doing so, I thought that the students likely would be from a variety of the gateway classes and probably would have different majors and experiences. I checked the names and email addresses of the students against a list of every student I had taught and those that I interviewed at this university as part of an earlier research study conducted by others. If any had matched or if I had recognized any of the students from any other interaction, I would not have included those students in the study.

The invitation invited volunteers to contact me by email, text, or phone to volunteer within 5 days after the email was sent to them. To avoid bothering students unnecessarily and as stated in the invitation, I did not ask the university to send the students reminders about the invitation. If I had not received enough responses from this first emailing, I would have asked the university partner to email the invitation to students who met the criteria and who had taken an online gateway class at the university before January 2019. I did not anticipate a problem with receiving enough responses for the study because hundreds of students were to be emailed, and I offered a \$25 gift card to those who were selected for the study to compensate them for the time they would spend in the process. I also based this expectation on my experience with the research study conducted by others in the summer of 2020. Despite all the issues related to the pandemic and with no incentive offered to the students for their participation, enough students volunteered that 24 group interviews were scheduled.

Although I was an adjunct professor at the university and had an email address associated with the university, my invitation asked students to reply with interest to my

Walden email address so that it was clear that the research study was being conducted as part of my doctoral studies at Walden University and not in association with my position as an adjunct professor for the university where the students attended. I also included my phone number for texting to make it easier for prospective participants to reply.

The email invitation included a description of the proposed study, the requirements for participants, an offer of a \$25.00 gift card as compensation for the participant's time, and a request that those interested in participating in the study or who had any questions reply to me by email, text, or phone within 5 days after the email was sent to them. To avoid bothering students unnecessarily and as stated in the invitation, I did not ask the partner site to send the students reminders about the invitation.

After a potential participant notified me that they were interested in participating in the study, I emailed the student a copy of the informed consent form. The informed consent form included a description of the study, the requirements for participants, the required information on informed consent for the potential participant to review, and an offer of a \$25.00 gift card as compensation for the participant's time. The possible participants had 5 days after the informed consent form was emailed to them to review the document and ask any questions as noted on the informed consent form. I asked them to reply by email with the words, "I consent" if they wished to move forward. If after receiving the informed consent form for review, a student then informed me that they consented to participating in the study, I asked the student for dates and times that were good for the individual within a specified range of 2 weeks for an interview of approximately 45 minutes via Zoom or a similar interactive technology or telephone,

whichever was preferred, with only the audio portion recorded. Since students who take online courses at this university use Zoom as part of required live sessions, I believed that they would be familiar with using this technology. I also asked each of these students to provide contact information such as their telephone and text numbers.

After I received a participant's informed consent to participate in the study, I sent the participant a confirmation email with their interview date, time, and required Zoom details including the specific link to my private Zoom office, which had unlimited meeting time. To ensure that only the specified participant could enter the Zoom meeting at that time, I enabled the Zoom waiting room so that anyone who wanted to enter the meeting had to be admitted by me. I admitted only the invited participant to the meeting. I included a calendar meeting request with each email for the participant to use if they wished. I sent a reminder email the day before the interview date to confirm. I sent a reminder text the day before if the participant had given me their text number to use.

If I had received more informed consent forms than 12, which was the maximum number of interviews planned for the study, I planned to reply to the students who would not be included in the study and thank them for their interest while letting them know that the participant slots had been filled. I also let them know that if for some reason one of the participants scheduled could not make the interview, I would email them to ask if they still were interested.

### **Instrumentation**

The primary data collection instrumentation for the proposed study was interviewing, which Patton (2015) listed as a primary data collection method for a basic

qualitative inquiry research study like this one. As Patton recommended, I created an interview protocol (see Appendix) that started by again ensuring that the participant was informed about important aspects of the study including the interview process, how the interview would be recorded (such as with Zoom with only the audio recorded or by telephone with the conversation recorded), how confidentiality would be maintained, and the participant's right to decline to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time. I planned to be and was the only person in my house during these interviews and to disable all phones, doorbells, and alarms.

The next part of my interview protocol included semistructured questions intended to help elicit rich, authentic data from the participants related to the overall research questions of the study. I designed the interview questions to be open-ended, general, and focused on exploring the research questions (Creswell, 2016). The interview questions were worded in ways that were appropriate to the audience of postsecondary online students with explanations of concepts that might be new to the students such as faculty social presence. The questions were arranged in a specific order for consistency, as suggested by Patton (2015), which also was intended to help me achieve data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). The interview protocol also included reminders to myself about checking at those specific points in the questions to see if I should ask probing follow-up questions then. Although I included probing follow-up questions in the interview protocol, the actual probing follow-up questions asked depended on each participant's responses as Patton suggested. Through the open-ended questions followed by appropriate probes, I hoped to learn from each participant what their perceptions were



with a minimum of influence from me. While the interview questions were structured to help ensure that the core interview questions were asked of each participant, my demeanor in all contacts with the participants was based on the principles of responsive interviewing, which focus on creating a pleasant, noncombative atmosphere to help build trust between the interviewer and the participants, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2011). I used reminders to myself by my computer to let silences sit and not rush the participant since valuable insights might otherwise be lost, as suggested by Patton. By combining the semistructured interview questions and follow-up probes designed to elicit information related to the research questions with a congenial manner and recognized strategies for effective interviewing of participants in a research study, I hoped to maximize the likelihood of obtaining thick, rich data through these interviews.

I wrote supplementary notes using a journal identified solely for this purpose. I also made observations in the journal and wrote down my thoughts or important points after each interview so that I could use the journal as a method of identifying and reflecting any biases of mine, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2011). My intent during the interviews, however, was to be an active listener and interviewer, with the focus on the participants and their responses.

In preparation for the interviews with the study participants, I conducted practice or mock interviews beforehand with four volunteers among my family and friends who were over 18 and had taken an online class in the past year. Although these participants in the practice interviews had not attended the same university as those at the study site, the process of interviewing the volunteers using the interview questions that I prepared

for the study (see Appendix) provided important feedback to me on how the questions and protocol functioned in practice. I used the experience that I gained in the practice interviews to make adjustments that seemed likely to refine the interview questions for the main study in the effort to obtain the most authentic, rich data possible.

### **Data Collection**

Before I collected any data, I ensured that I had permission from Walden University's Institutional Research Board (IRB), No. 04-06-21-0377229; updated, written permission from the community partner site; and informed consent from the participants. My IRB contacts at the community partner site said that they did not need to conduct an IRB review because their only involvement with the study would be to email my study invitation to possible participants. I started the process of collecting the data using semistructured interview questions via Zoom. If a participant had preferred to use different interactive software than Zoom or had preferred to conduct the interview by telephone, I would have done so. I wrote supplementary notes in a journal.

At the agreed-upon date and time of the interview with each participant and before the interview began, I first introduced myself, and welcomed and thanked the participant. Next, although I already had given the participant this information in advance, I reviewed the informed consent form and details including the purpose of the study, the expectations, the implications, the participant's rights, confidentiality, and all areas included as needed to protect the participant as approved by Walden's IRB with the participant. I then asked the participant if they had any questions, and I answered those accordingly. I gave the participant a brief explanation of the research I was doing and the

purpose of the interview before I asked any interview questions. I took care to say these things with no leading inferences as to what I thought might be found or what I might have liked to be found. In truth, from my years of experience as a professor and in interviews I had conducted for others' studies, I was confident that I did not have a robust idea what the participants might say and that I would have interesting new viewpoints to consider after these interviews. I began by hearing the participants' perspectives.

I reminded each participant that they were welcome to say whatever they wanted, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that the participant could stop the interview at any time or decline to answer any question they did not wish to answer. I told them that in that case, I still would give the participant the promised \$25.00 gift card as compensation for their time. I also mentioned that to respect the person's time, I had scheduled 45 minutes for the interview but that I would be happy to spend more time if the interviewee wished. Finally, I asked again if the participant had any questions. If they did, I answered those questions and if not, I confirmed with the participant that they had agreed to participate in this study by having sent me an "I consent" email or text. I required documented informed consent from a participant before interviewing that person. Once the participant had confirmed that they consented to participate in this study, I began the interview.

I recorded only the audio for each interview conducted by Zoom in duplicate in case of technical issues using the native recording software in the application and recording software from my computer and phone as a backup. No video was recorded. Although I did not anticipate conducting any of the interviews by phone rather than

Zoom, if a participant had preferred to be interviewed by phone rather than using Zoom, I would have used two audio-recording devices. I took notes during each interview using a journal. No one other than me was in my house when I conducted the interviews so there was no risk of another person at my location hearing the participants' replies. I also disabled doorbells, telephone ringers, and alarms to prevent interruptions. The participants were at whatever location they preferred during the interviews. No other people were noted in their vicinities.

As soon as an interview concluded, I backed up the audio recordings on a separate external drive at my house that I keep in a password-protected, fireproof lockbox that only I can open. All the computer files were password protected by me and kept on computer systems that only I can access. I then reviewed my notes from the interview process.

I had planned to use a professional transcription firm to transcribe the interviews. However, after I tried Zoom Pro and other transcription apps, I decided to use the Zoom Pro transcription because of its high level of accuracy compared to the others and because it was free with my Zoom Pro subscription. In addition, the transcribed text from Zoom Pro was available immediately on my own system, so I did not have to let the audio recordings leave my computer even to be transcribed.

I sent each participant a copy of the transcript with their comments highlighted and asked them to let me know within 5 days after the date of the email if they had any changes or comments. I reminded the participants that they did not have to review the transcript or reply although they were welcome to do so. Six of the eight participants

replied saying that no changes were needed; the other two participants did not reply. I responded quickly to each participant who replied to thank them for their reply. If a participant had asked for any changes, I would have taken care of those immediately as well. I updated the participants about the final steps of the study along with my contact information in case they have any questions in the future.

I sent each individual a \$25.00 Amazon e-gift card for participating in the study. I also sent a \$25 gift card to two individuals who had agreed to be interviewed but were not because data saturation was reached before then. I believed giving the participants this gift card was an ethical requirement because many of the students who attended this university had jobs, families, and other responsibilities in addition to being students themselves. While the interviews were scheduled for 45 minutes, that time did not include the students' time in responding to my invitation and logging into the Zoom meeting. Consequently, I believed that the \$25.00 gift card was necessary to make up in part for the loss of the participants' time in helping with this study. I verified that each gift card was received using the automatic tracking by Amazon. Further verification of a participant's receipt of their gift card occurred when recipients sent notes to thank me for their gift card although they did not need to do so.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Key elements of data analysis that were consistent with my chosen research approach of a basic qualitative study included coding the transcribed data, reviewing the coded data for the presence of patterns or themes, and interpreting the data as described by Creswell (2016), Patton (2015), and Rubin and Rubin (2011). I hand-coded the data so

that I would be as close as possible to the coding for results that most accurately reflected the experiences and perceptions of the participants. I also believed that the need to review the data multiple times in the hand-coding process would help me identify and address possible biases that I might not notice in a faster, more automated process such as with a software program.

To prepare for the coding, I read the transcript for an interview again in its entirety without making notes to ensure a general familiarity with the overall interview. Then I began the hand-coding process for that interview. I used my notes, highlighting, and a template with sections for terms, context, auditory cues, comments, and questions. I used Microsoft Word with its options such as tables, highlighting in different colors, copy and paste, search options to find other and similar words, side-by-side comparisons, and other functions to help me in the coding and analysis processes. My familiarity with the program helped me in this process. I set those results aside and returned to them later in a second review in case I had missed crucial details during the first review. I repeated this process for each interview. I watched for my own possible biases in making decisions in the coding process.

I then created another table to group similar words, phrases, and differences by participant, adding to those as I identified them. In this process, I realized that I had come to think of the participants by their pseudonyms as well as by their individual responses. I was happy about that since it made the process more efficient, and I felt even better about my efforts to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Using the approach suggested by Creswell (2016), Patton (2015), and Rubin and Rubin (2011), after I identified codes from the data, I reviewed the codes for patterns and themes that emerged from the data related to my research question. I then considered the draft themes and reviewed the codes with the possible themes in mind, adjusting the draft themes as I felt was warranted. Then I let the themes sit so that when I read them again, I had fresh eyes. I also used a thesaurus to help me look at synonyms and antonyms to see if I had missed or misidentified any important themes. I repeated this process several times. I stayed watchful for my possible biases in the identification of patterns and themes especially as related to my experiences as a professor and as a student both in traditional and online university settings.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

I worked to ensure credibility in this study by conducting the fieldwork in the data-collection process in a careful, systematic manner; analyzing the data conscientiously and systematically; and following the established procedures and protocols carefully in alignment with the principles of qualitative inquiry as suggested by Patton (2015, p. 653). Another method I used to help ensure credibility was Patton's practice of memoing, where I reviewed the notes that I took during each interview immediately after that interview and clarified any visually ambiguous areas from my handwritten notes while the interview was fresh in my mind. During this same process, I looked for and noted any items that I felt could reflect any biases of mine.

**Transferability**

Efforts to ensure transferability in qualitative studies such as this one require the researcher to provide careful details of the boundaries of the study (Shenton, 2004, p. 71). As a result, findings that differ between studies may not indicate issues with trustworthiness but may instead simply represent the variable perceptions and realities of the different participants (Shenton, 2004). Accordingly, to allow a reader to attempt to determine if the findings from the proposed study could be transferrable, or applicable, to other contexts, I described the setting of the university and the student participants in enough detail while preserving the confidentiality of the university and the participants so that others could decide if the results from this study might apply to situations of interest to them. I also worked to obtain thick, rich data from the interviews of the participants' perceptions of their experiences with faculty social presence in their online classes and their perceptions of its effects on their learning in case those findings might help others with their efforts.

**Dependability**

To help ensure the dependability of the study, meaning the consistency of the research over the length of the study (Patton, 2015), I kept and regularly reviewed an audit trail of the study in a research journal. Information I recorded in this journal over the study included my initial thoughts about the process and what I hoped I might learn from the interviews, my perceived biases, and my reflections about the study process as well as the findings and interpretations. This research journal helped me record any changes that might have occurred in the process as well as any changes in my



perspectives so that these items were catalogued as part of the overall study with the goal of maintaining consistency. I reviewed those notes periodically to help me maintain my awareness of these issues.

### **Confirmability**

To help ensure confirmability so that the study was as unbiased as possible (Patton, 2015), I watched for, recorded, and reflected on any possible areas of bias I had. Although I know it is not possible to eliminate bias entirely, I was attuned to the possibility of bias and followed carefully the methods and procedures detailed here according to the accepted practices of scientific inquiry. I recorded the process and my reflections as well as any biases noted in the audit trail in my research journal. I sent the participants the transcripts of their interviews and asked them to verify accuracy and let me know of any changes they felt were necessary if they wished. I employed Denzin's (1978) approach to triangulation by obtaining data from the different interviews conducted in the study.

## **Ethical Procedures**

### **Agreements to Gain Access to Participants**

I received IRB approval for the study from Walden. The community partner gave me written permission to collect data from their students. The IRB contacts at the partner site said that because their only involvement with the study would be to email the study invitation to the possible participants, they did not need to conduct an IRB review. They sorted their student records to meet the parameters I gave them from this study and

emailed my invitation to participate in the study to the students. The students were directed to reply to me as written in the invitation.

### **Treatment of Participants**

As noted above, the community partner sorted their student records to meet the parameters I gave them from this study and emailed my invitation to participate in the study to the students. The students were directed in the invitation to reply to me. The invitations were sent to all of the students at one time. By doing so, I hoped that students from a variety of the gateway classes and probably with different majors would respond. I checked the names and email addresses of the students against a list of every student I had taught and those that I had interviewed at this university as part of a research study conducted by others. If any had matched or if I had recognized any of the names from any other connection in my life, I would not have included those students in the study.

I gave each individual a \$25.00 Amazon e-gift card for participating in the study. I also gave a \$25 gift card to two individuals who had agreed to be interviewed but were not because data saturation was reached before then. I believed giving the participants this gift card was an ethical requirement because many of the students who attended this university had jobs, families, and other responsibilities in addition to being students themselves. While the interviews were scheduled for 45 minutes, that time did not include the students' time in responding to my invitation and logging into the Zoom meeting. Consequently, I believed that the \$25.00 gift card was necessary to make up in part for the loss of the participants' time in helping with this study. I verified that each gift card was received using the automatic tracking by Amazon. Further verification of a

participant's receipt of their gift card occurred when recipients sent notes to thank me for their gift card although they did not need to do so.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I discussed the research design and rationale as well as how the research design related to the research question, and the role of the researcher. I also discussed the methodology for the study including the participant selection logic, the instrumentation, and the procedures for the practice interviews as well as the recruitment, participation, data collection, and data analysis. In other sections of this chapter, I addressed issues of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and ethical concerns. In Chapter 4 I address the research questions, the setting of the study, participants' demographics, the methodology including participant selection logic; instrumentation; the procedures used for the recruitment, participation, and data collection; and the data analysis. I also discuss issues of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and I present the results. I close the chapter with a summary.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to find out how postsecondary students taking online gateway classes at a 4-year, nonprofit, private, adult-focused university in the U.S. Midwest perceived faculty social presence in those classes and how they felt that social presence affected their learning. In alignment with this purpose, the research questions addressed how the students perceived faculty social presence in those classes and how they perceived that social presence as affecting their learning.

In this chapter, I discuss the setting, the demographics, and the methodology including the participant selection logic; the instrumentation; the procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; and the data analysis. I also address issues of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, before presenting the results. The chapter concludes with a summary.

### **Setting**

At the time of the interviews, in April of 2021, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic likely had affected these students' lives in some way for months. Most of the classes the participants discussed took place in 2020 and 2021 during the pandemic, although a few occurred before the university moved to remote learning only, closing its face-to-face classrooms. At the time the interviews were conducted, however, the pandemic was still affecting the United State in major ways.

It seemed reasonable to assume that the professors who taught the classes that the participants took during the pandemic were stressed more than usual even if they already had taught the course online before then. Many professors at the university had outside

careers in addition to teaching so their work situations also may have changed. Professors who had school-age children also would have had to manage their children suddenly being at home. Stress felt by the professors also may have affected their teaching in some way. For the participants and their professors, the question of what the future held was probably on their minds.

### **Demographics**

All the participants attended the 4-year, private, nonprofit, Midwestern U.S. university in the study and had taken at least one online entry class as specified in Chapter 3. While the invitation went to students from around the world, most of the students lived in the United States. All eight of those interviewed lived in the continental United States. For the purposes of this study, five of the eight students identified as female and three identified as male. Seven had paying jobs, and one was a stay-at-home parent.

While some of the participants said they would have taken their courses online regardless of the pandemic due to their locations and preferences, others reported that they would have preferred to take some or all of their classes face to face, especially for classes they deemed more difficult to take online, such as math. Even for the participants who were used to taking classes online, issues such as bandwidth with so many people in their area suddenly all on the internet, childcare issues, and job changes were noted. Since the university has no residential facilities for students and the participants were all adults and most worked outside their homes, the participants did not have to relocate due to issues like dorms closing as other college students did.

Multiple students had changed from working outside to their homes to working from home and one participant had lost their job as a result of the pandemic. Another participant's spouse had lost their job, preventing the family from purchasing a house. Participants with children found themselves juggling both their jobs and the needs of their children who previously had been in school as the participants worked and took classes from home. Concerns about their own health and that of loved ones also likely affected the participants. While not all of the participants mentioned being stressed about the effects of the pandemic, it is likely that they were on some level, which may have affected their perceptions of their class experiences even if the classes were taken before the pandemic began.

Table 1 lists the pseudonyms created for the participants in alphabetical order, their age (identified in a range to maintain confidentiality), whether they had previous experience with online learning before the online entry class discussed in this study, whether they had previous college experience, their major, and the general subject of the course they discussed.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

| Participant | Age   | Online Exp. | Prev. College | Major                    | Course         |
|-------------|-------|-------------|---------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Christopher | 18-30 | Yes         | Yes           | Information technology   | Computer       |
| Kate        | 31-50 | Yes         | Yes           | Public relations         | College Basics |
| Lindsey     | 18-30 | Yes         | Yes           | Marketing                | Advertising    |
| Morgan      | 18-30 | No          | Yes           | Psychology               | English        |
| Nick        | 18-30 | Yes         | Yes           | Cybersecurity            | Communications |
| Olivia      | 31-50 | No          | Yes           | Marketing                | Math           |
| Sienna      | 18-30 | Yes         | Yes           | Interactive media design | Photography    |
| William     | 31-50 | No          | Yes           | Management               | Humanities     |

**Data Collection**

I received IRB approval for the study from Walden University. I sent a copy of the IRB approval to the community partner for their records and to notify them that I was ready for the invitations to be emailed out to the specified groups of students whenever the partner was ready. On April 9, 2021, the community partner sent the emails out and, within an hour, I had multiple responses of interest and dozens of replies by the next day. Most of the respondents had noted in their emails how they met the study requirements, such as being over 18 and having taken an online entry class at the university within the specified time. I first verified that I never had taught any of those students in a class, did not interview them when I helped others with the community partner in a research study at the university, or had no other connection I knew of with them.

The originally proposed sample size was eight to 12 individuals. For ethical reasons, if data saturation occurred after the first eight interviews or later, I planned to stop interviewing. I determined, based on Guest et al. (2006), that data saturation was occurring when no new data, themes, or codes were being identified in the study. Given the many responses I had received, I stopped recruiting. I was not concerned about needing more participation later and did not want students to commit by providing their informed consent if I would not be able to interview them within the ethical bounds of the study. Consequently, I planned only to send out additional informed consent forms after completing and coding those first eight to 10 interviews.

I then sent the first 10 students a copy of the informed consent document and asked them to read it and reply within 5 days after the date of my response with their consent if they decided they wanted to participate. Seven of those 10 students replied quickly with their consent, so I scheduled interview times that those individuals said would be best for them.

Ultimately, I received more than 100 responses to my invitation for participants. I sent each respondent beyond those first 10 students an email thanking them for their interest and letting them know that while I thought I had all the participants needed, I would contact them if it turned out that I needed more participants to see if they still were interested. I received many gracious responses offering to help if I needed more participants. If I had anticipated this response, I would have had the university send the first wave of invitations to only 200 students.



I did not receive consent from three of the first 10 respondents within the 5-day period noted, so when that deadline passed, I sent a note and an informed consent form, as promised, to the next three people who had expressed interest; those individuals replied with their consent.

As discussed in Chapter 3, I interviewed the eight participants who met the inclusion criteria using Zoom with no video and only the audio recorded. The participants were given the choice of doing the interview by Zoom or telephone; all preferred to use Zoom with audio only. While I had informed consent from two additional participants and more than 100 emails from others interested in participating in the study, I reached data saturation after eight interviews, so I did not interview the other two to uphold the ethical standards of the study. Because those individuals had completed the informed consent form and were willing to set an interview date, I still sent each of them a \$25 gift card as I did for the eight participants that I interviewed.

I interviewed the first eight participants who had provided their consent between April 12 and April 20, 2021. Each interview was conducted via Zoom, which the participants all were familiar with using. I initially emailed each participant a private, individualized link for my private Zoom room for the date and time agreed upon and then, the day before the scheduled interview, emailed the participant to confirm that the date and time would still work for the individual. The interviews were held as scheduled except for one that needed to be delayed a half hour due to an unexpected event in the participant's schedule and one that the participant forgot entirely until the next day, when they wrote to apologize and reschedule. That interview then was held as agreed.

Although no video would have been recorded in any case, I asked the participants if they wanted the video to be on during the interview with only the audio recorded. None of them wanted the video on, so only the audio was recorded. I used Zoom Pro, which offers free, real-time, live transcription that scrolls at the bottom of the screen as those in the Zoom session talk. The participants could see the program typing as we talked and were interested to see how well it recorded the words although not perfectly. I asked each participant if they were fine with the live transcription, and each said yes. I also used a separate recording program in my computer to record the audio just in case some issue occurred with the Zoom audio. I was the only person at home when I conducted the interviews, and the participants were at their preferred locations at home or, in one case, in their car in a parking lot after work.

I followed the interview protocol that was developed in the proposal and IRB approval phase for this basic qualitative inquiry research. To explore the research questions and further the goal of collecting authentic, rich data, I asked open-ended, semistructured interview questions about the participants' perceptions related to faculty social presence in their online undergraduate classes at the 4-year, private, nonprofit, Midwestern U.S. university. I probed for additional information or clarification when it seemed necessary for me to understand the participant's perspective. The probing questions and active listening helped me collect the most authentic data I could. I also took supplementary notes during the interviews in a notebook. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, with most lasting around 50 minutes. All the participants had volunteered to participate, and I gave each multiple opportunities to change their

minds including on the days of the interviews. All of the participants seemed happy to participate.

As soon as an interview concluded, I backed up the audio recordings on a separate external drive at my house and placed that drive in a password-protected, fireproof lockbox. I also reviewed my notes and reflected on any possible areas of researcher bias. For each interview, Zoom Pro provided a text file of all the speech it recorded in that interview right after the recording stopped. I named and saved those text files into a password-protected, special folder on my computer along with the audio recordings, which I also named. Later, I pasted the text from each text file into its own Microsoft Word document and saved each with the corresponding name. Transferring those text files to Word allowed me to fix errors in the transcription and highlight the responses from the participant as well as to highlight code words and search for other terms. All the computer files were password protected by me and kept on computer systems that only I can access. I then reviewed my notes from the interview process. In addition to my automatic daily backups to a password-protected folder on a password-protected cloud server, I manually saved the data in a separate password-protected folder and labelled all as not to be deleted for at least 5 years. As I made updates, I saved those data to the same password-protected folders and locations.

Although I had planned to use a professional transcription firm to transcribe the interviews and also tried transcription apps, the Zoom Pro text was more accurate than the other applications I had tried, free, and immediately available so the audio recordings and transcribed text never left my computer. I sent each participant a copy of the

transcript with their comments highlighted and asked them to let me know within 5 days after the date of the email if they had any changes or areas they wanted to clarify. I noted that they were not required to review the transcript or reply but were welcome to do so, and I thanked them again. Six of the eight participants replied saying that no changes were needed; the other two participants did not reply. I responded quickly to each participant who replied to thank them for their reply. If a participant had asked for any changes, I would have taken care of those immediately as well. I updated the participants about the final steps of the study along with my contact information in case they have any questions in the future.

I sent each individual a \$25.00 gift card for participating in the study. I also sent a \$25 gift card to the two individuals who had agreed to be interviewed but were not because data saturation was reached before then. I believed giving the participants this gift card was an ethical requirement because many of the students who attended this university had jobs, families, and other responsibilities in addition to being students themselves. While the interviews were scheduled for 45 minutes, that time did not include the students' time in responding to my invitation and logging into the Zoom meeting. Consequently, I believed that the \$25.00 gift card was necessary to make up in part for the loss of the students' time in helping with this study. I verified that each gift card was received using the automatic tracking by Amazon. Further verification of a participant's receipt of their gift card occurred when recipients sent notes to thank me for their gift card although they did not need to do so.

I had no variations in the data collection process from the plan discussed in Chapter 3. No unusual circumstances were encountered during the data collection. The process went smoothly in large part to the careful planning and reviews of the proposed plan by my chair, second committee member, university research reviewer (URR), and IRB. I felt prepared and the participants seemed to respond favorably throughout the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

As I planned, I used elements of data analysis that corresponded with my research approach of a basic qualitative study. Those items included coding the transcribed data, reviewing the coded data to look for themes or patterns, and interpreting the data as Creswell (2016), Patton (2015), and Rubin and Rubin (2011) described. I hand-coded the data so that I would be as close as possible to the coding for results that most accurately reflected the experiences and perceptions of the participants. I also believed that the need to review the data multiple times in the hand-coding process would help me identify and address possible biases that I might not notice in a faster, more automated process such as with a dedicated software program.

To prepare for the coding, I read the transcript for an interview again in its entirety without making notes to ensure a general familiarity with the overall interview. Then I began the hand-coding process for that interview. I used my notes, highlighting, and a template with sections for terms, context, auditory cues, comments, and questions. I used Microsoft Word with its options such as tables, highlighting in different colors, copy and paste, search options to find identical or similar words, side-by-side comparisons,

and other program functions to help me in the coding and analysis processes. My familiarity with the program helped me in this process both by the sense of security I felt at knowing I was using the program correctly and because I felt like I knew the data better than I would have if I had used a dedicated, qualitative-coding software program. I set those results aside and returned to them later in a second review in case I had missed crucial details during the first review. I repeated this process for each interview. I watched for my own possible biases in making decisions in the coding process.

Using the approach suggested by Creswell (2016), Patton (2015), and Rubin and Rubin (2011), after I identified codes from the data, I reviewed the codes for patterns and themes that emerged from the data related to my research question. I then considered the draft themes and reviewed the codes with the possible themes in mind, adjusting the draft themes as I felt was warranted. Then I let the themes sit so that when I read them again, I had fresh eyes. I also used a thesaurus to help me look at synonyms and antonyms to see if I had missed or misidentified any important themes. I repeated this process several times. I stayed watchful for my possible biases in the identification of patterns and themes especially as related to my experiences as a professor and as a student both in traditional and online university settings.

I then created another table to group similar words, phrases, and differences by participant, adding to those as I identified them. In my work and in my writing, I always have worked on documents by initially amassing large amounts of notes and highlighting words, phrases, or entire sentences with a particular color and even font color to represent items I felt went together and then using headings and highlighting to designate and

further refine various groups or particular characteristics. I turned to that for this process as well because it was more efficient and effective for me not to be constrained with table boundaries. To make it easier for me to find a heading when I was organizing codes and possible themes at that point, I created a table of contents and marked the headings accordingly so that I could update the table of contents and quickly click there to navigate to a specific heading in the document. I also used the search function in Word with various words, phrases, parts of sentences, and synonyms. I periodically revised the headings and the text, updating the table of contents at the same time.

I chose this process because I knew it would be the most effective choice for me because I have used it for years and I have confidence in how to use it including in refinements. I then continued to consider and refine the codes, themes, and subthemes. In this process, I realized that I had come to think of the participants by their pseudonyms as well as by their individual responses rather than by their actual names. I was happy about that since it made the process more efficient, and I felt even more better about my efforts to protect the confidentiality of the participants. I created a table and began placing items in the table and editing and refining as I reviewed it. Table 2 lists the themes, some of the many code words I used, and the associated research questions. Three themes emerged from the codes in each of the eight interviews. The themes were faculty social presence and advancing learning in synchronous virtual sessions, faculty social presence and advancing learning in asynchronous interactions, and faculty social presence and advancing learning with demeanor.

**Table 2***Themes and Codes*

| Themes   | Codes  |
|--|--|
| Faculty social presence and advancing learning in synchronous virtual sessions | Collaborative, hands-on, engagement, engaging, relating content to real-life experiences, presence, being there, involvement, showing up, available, live Zoom sessions, real-life, real-world, energetic, passion for the subject, adult students' experience, feeling comfortable, relatability, relating, reliable, demonstrating, demonstrate, welcoming questions, welcoming different opinions, encouraging, anticipating, sensitivity to students, standoffish, online vs. face-to-face, learning, online, using students' names, not making assumptions, professors' treatment of others |
| Faculty social presence and advancing learning in asynchronous interactions    | Responsiveness, helpful, reliable, guidance, guiding, joining in, being part of things, being involved, involvement, emoticons, gifs, welcoming questions, welcoming different opinions, sharing additional information, personable, interested in student success, humor, following up, announcements, phone calls, classroom calendar, boundaries, weekly updates, emailing professors, emails from professors, texting, acknowledging preferred pronouns, using preferred pronouns, encouraging, anticipating   |
| Faculty social presence and advancing learning through demeanor                | Helpful, personable, interested in student success, humor, empathy, understanding adult students, adult students are different, empathy, not making assumptions, trusting the professor, trust, respect, mutual respect, accommodating, flexible, looking out for students, encouraging, cheerful, positive, clear, fear of being alone if professor interactions are difficult, professors' treatment of others   |



To conclude this section, I did not identify any discrepant cases in my study. If I had, I would have identified the characteristics of the discrepant case and then considered how it related to the other data. I would have included that information here to provide the clearest, most accurate description of the data.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

I worked to ensure credibility in this study by conducting the fieldwork in the data collection process in a careful, systematic manner; analyzing the data conscientiously and systematically; and following the established procedures and protocols carefully in alignment with the principles of qualitative inquiry as suggested by Patton (2015, p. 653). Another method I used to help ensure credibility was Patton's (2015) practice of memoing, where I reviewed the notes that I took during each interview immediately after that interview and clarified any visually ambiguous areas from my handwritten notes while the interview was fresh in my mind. During this same process, I looked for and noted any items that I felt could reflect any biases of mine. I did not change the implementation or adjust any of the credibility strategies that I listed in Chapter 3.

#### **Transferability**

Efforts to ensure transferability in qualitative studies such as this one require the researcher to provide careful details of the boundaries of the study (Shenton, 2004, p. 71). As a result, findings that differ between studies may not indicate issues with trustworthiness but may instead simply represent the variable perceptions and realities of the different participants (Shenton, 2004). Accordingly, to allow a reader to attempt to

determine if the findings from the proposed study could be transferrable, or applicable, to other contexts, I described the setting of the university and the student participants in enough detail while preserving the confidentiality of the university and the participants so that others could decide if the results from this study might apply to situations of interest to them. I also worked to obtain thick, rich data from the interviews of the participants' perceptions of their experiences with faculty social presence in their online classes and their perceptions of its effects on their learning in case those findings might help others with their efforts. I did not change the implementation or adjust any of the transferability strategies that I listed in Chapter 3.

### **Dependability**

To help ensure the dependability of the study, meaning the consistency of the research over the length of the study (Patton, 2015), I kept and regularly reviewed an audit trail of the study in a research journal. Information I recorded in this journal over the study included my initial thoughts about the process and what I hoped I might learn from the interviews, my perceived biases, and my reflections about the study process as well as the findings and interpretations. This research journal helped me record any changes that might have occurred in the process as well as any changes in my perspectives so that these items were catalogued as part of the overall study with the goal of maintaining consistency. I reviewed those notes periodically to help me maintain my awareness of these issues. I did not change the implementation or adjust any of the consistency strategies that I listed in Chapter 3.

## **Confirmability**

To help ensure confirmability so that the study was as unbiased as possible (Patton, 2015), I watched for, recorded, and reflected on any possible areas of bias I had. Although I know it is not possible to eliminate bias entirely, I was attuned to the possibility of bias and followed carefully the methods and procedures detailed in the proposal for the study according to the accepted practices of scientific inquiry. I recorded the process and my reflections as well as any biases noted in the audit trail in my research journal. I sent the participants the transcripts of their interviews and asked them to verify accuracy and let me know of any changes they felt were necessary if they wished. I employed Denzin's (1978) approach to triangulation by obtaining data from the different interviews conducted in the study. I did not change the implementation or adjust any of the consistency strategies that I listed in Chapter 3.

## **Results of Analyses**

### **Theme 1: Faculty Social Presence and Advancing Learning in Synchronous Virtual Sessions**

All eight participants ranked the synchronous live virtual sessions as the most important way that their professors demonstrated their presence and involvement. Participants also noted that how the professors demonstrated their presence affected how the students felt about the professors and about the online course compared to face-to-face courses. Morgan reported that because of the live virtual sessions, the class felt "very traditional." She added:

This was the first time that I actually felt like I knew my professor at all, and they knew me, too. Normally in person, I could sit in the back of a giant auditorium and hide and run away when the class was over. She was very active in classes. I just thought she had this kind of kindness and graciousness in the [virtual] meetings and that she wanted to actively build rapport with students.

Students also mentioned professors' attention to students as individuals in the synchronous virtual sessions as an important way that professors that demonstrated their social presence. Sienna said:

He asked every single person in the live [virtual] sessions, "How are you doing today?" And if anybody said, "Good," he'd be like, "No, good is not an answer; how are you really doing today?" and just try to get more out of every student but he was kind of just like kidding, and if, you know, if they said, "Well, that's all I got to say," he was fine with that. It's like the professor makes sure that everybody is involved in a professional level [and] in a personal level.

All eight participants also discussed the use of names—theirs or their professors—as a way that their professors demonstrated their faculty social presence in the synchronous virtual sessions. For instance, Sienna said:

The fact that they actually mentioned, say my name, I don't know why but personally I feel like it makes a big difference. [Then] I'm not just a student; there are a lot of professors and mostly online professors don't even know the names of the students. So, to find someone who would just say your name just makes me

feel, I don't know, special. I mean the small details make a person or students feel more welcome.

Discussing the professor's use of students' names in her online class, Kate said:

It was very interactive, and I think that helps because then, you know, they'll call on you kind of like, you know, if you're in a regular class, and they'll be like, "Kate, what do you think?" It was definitely engaging. So that definitely shows a professor being aware. During some of my [virtual] meetings, some of the professors have been like, "Is that how you pronounce your name?," not necessarily with me but with some of the people. And they're like, yes, and they [the students] were more enthusiastic. I think it's because people do screw up their name a lot. So, I think that for those students, just being able to hear their names and actually being recognized in that way may be important to them. I think it's nice.

Students also noted how professors expressed their own personalities during the synchronous virtual sessions as an important way that professors demonstrated their social presence, something also addressed in Theme 3's focus on how participants reported feeling that their professors' demeanors demonstrated the professors' social presence and how the participants perceived that as affecting their learning. William explained his preference for live virtual sessions over other types of classroom interactions, "I think the [virtual] sessions [are] the best because you can hear if the teacher was having a good day, if she's excited about this. You can hear it in a person's voice if they're excited about it or not."

Nick shared that, “I do love whenever professors [using PowerPoints] have, like, little funny, and just, like, transitions or little tidbits that they add and that are just additional to the information.”

Aspects of synchronous virtual sessions that students mentioned in specific included students being able to have their questions answered right there in the live meetings rather than having to send an email and wait for a reply. Christopher said:

They [live virtual sessions] affected my learning positively as did the emails in the fact that if I had a question, I could get that question answered, and I'm a person where the sooner I get the question answered, the better [it] clicks in my head. So, in an email, he [the professor] gives you a definition and maybe an example, which helps give you that right idea, but if there's like a specific point to it you're not understanding, you'd have to have multiple emails to really clarify that whereas if you did that in a [virtual] meeting, it would take just a few moments because he could elaborate further on what he was talking about.

Students also talked about the positive difference that professors using a hands-on approach in the live virtual sessions made in terms of demonstrating their social presence.

William specified that one of the most helpful things that professors can do to demonstrate their presence and involvement in the class and to help their students learn is to work through questions or problems in the class while students watched or worked on the same items at the same time:

The professor would explain like, this is what's expected out of each paper. She might say, “You need to do three references and one of them needs to be this.”

Then she would go on the website, go to the library page, and say, “Look, this is how you get the information; this is how you cite it,” and she would legit show you right then and there as it's being recorded. You can literally go back and just reenact exactly what she did. And it was simple as that. There was always a demonstration for anything that seemed different. For example, if we need to attach like an Excel sheet or something to an assignment, she would show you how to do it really quick.

The value of the professors’ social presence was also shown by the participants’ concern when their faculty did not “show up”. Olivia said, “I had one [professor] who never showed up, then had a 120-minute meet session, and never had another meet session again. So, I basically taught myself; the whole class had to.”

All of the participants reported feeling that their professors demonstrated their presence and involvement more when the professors used webcams for at least part of the live virtual sessions. Regarding the webcam aspect, Lindsey said:

I don’t actually like it when everyone in the, like, [virtual] class has their camera off, including the instructor, which is kind of weird. I typically don't have mine on but most of the time the instructor has, or they've at least been sharing a screen or giving some kind of visual, rather than just kind of talking to a screen. I guess listening is easier and to, I guess, engage if it's like, you can see the person that's actually talking and giving like the majority of this lecture. I think it might kind of like cultivate a more of a sense of like more normalcy, even though we are, like,

in kind of a really virtual world. It kind of gets back to that, like, more of a personal connection rather than just everything virtual, kind of computerized.

Nick also preferred it when his professor used their webcam, saying:

I do like having the option to see them. Something that [another professor] does is they will have like a PowerPoint, [and] they'll share the screen so that the PowerPoint's up, but they still have like a little box in the corner that's a video of them so you can still see them, which gives you a better sense of interaction with them.

Kate said:

Having the professor's webcam on helped especially at first because then it feels like you're in an actual environment where you're seeing the person on the other end. I think it's nice seeing the face of the person you're talking to, especially your professor. With the professor, I generally prefer it on just because I actually feel like I'm not talking to a blank screen, but, again, it's ultimately it's personal choice and as long as the information is presented like, for example, if they're putting up PowerPoints, I don't necessarily need to see their face and I think as long as there's something on the screen, that is guiding my attention to like the wording or the imagery to what they're talking about and how we relate to it.

Participants discussed a variety of aspects in the live virtual sessions as ways that their professors demonstrated their social presence. Multiple students explained that they wanted not only to be introduced to the professor and each other but also to the classroom itself and related items like the library they might use in that class as well. Kate said,



“[Like], where do I go to for this and that.” William discussed how his professor had created an interactive experience in the live virtual session for class introductions:

In the first live [virtual] session, within that first week, she basically did a recap of, “Hey, this is who I am in case you guys didn't read it”, and then she started to hand it off where each student had, you know, about 2 to 3 minutes to give their bio . . .; it was more of a communication interaction within the zoom. It was very good compared to sitting there reading all day what people are saying. After a while, I start to lose interest when it's the same person consecutively talking. I feel like I'm in a lecture, whether or to it's something that I want to hear. So, when you give me the opportunity to speak, or somebody else's speak it regains my interest regarding any class that I'm in.

Multiple participants talked about how the informal time that they spent chatting or just hanging out in the virtual meeting room with their professor before the sessions started helped them feel like their professor was involved with them. Kate said she found the professor's use of music in the virtual meeting room before the class actually began fun and relaxing. William explained:

Sometimes you know as we're waiting for everybody to join the [virtual] session, there's been times where, you know, the professor just chit-chatted with people like, “So what's people's plans this week, what did you guys do last week?” and the teacher just talked to you as if, you know, we're close friends. It was nice because it made me feel maybe this is not just the professional business relationship.

Christopher discussed the difference that going into the virtual meeting room before class began made to his perceptions of his professor's social presence:

Me going in there early to be with just myself and him and sometimes another student or two and we could kind of make small talk with him like, "Hey, you know, this e commerce thing we're talking about last week, did you see that this company is trying to get into e commerce or whatever?" And then we would make small talk or, like, if you related to something, he'd be like, "You know I was on this one job and we had the CFO who did this," like, kind of like a swapping of stories almost. That made it more real.

Although seven of the participants talked about the live virtual sessions with their professors as experiences that demonstrated the professor's social presence in the class in a positive way, one found the experience with their particular professor less than ideal.

Lindsey shared:

I feel like when someone answers a question, he tells them like it's wrong but then kind of paraphrases what they say and then kind of has a negative emphasis, so it kind of makes no one [want] to participate. It just kind of makes me [feel] like I'm less of a person, I guess, or [less of] a professional.

Participants had different perspectives of what aspects of the professor's social presence in the synchronous live virtual sessions helped them most with learning. Most of the participants felt that the professor sharing information and demonstrations on that week's material closely related to the book and assignments was the most helpful to their learning. Olivia shared that one way a professor demonstrates social presence that helps

her learn is not only by introducing themselves in the first virtual meeting of a course but also showing the students the various classroom features that will be used in the course.

Regarding the hands-on approach of her professor involving the students in the synchronous virtual classes (RQ2) for her digital photography class, Sienna said:

[It] enhanced my illustration of critical thinking, in a very practical way, because everybody would show their work, and everybody would say their opinions and we would discuss them and that's not something that all classes offer. [In terms of learning] it just made me hear opinions from different students and think in a different way. The professor encouraged everybody to say their opinion. He would ask for details about a specific concept or he would ask me further questions in order to get more information from me. So, it totally enhanced my sense of critical thinking.

Sienna also felt that this approach increased her public-speaking skills:

I'm not a public speaker person. I'm not a person who would say I was good at using words. But for me, it was the way the professor handled things in this class made me feel more encouraged to say my opinion, become more social if you know what I mean. Criticism was welcomed; I mean everybody was nice and they would say so in a nice way. The next week we would take reshoots so based on the criticism or the comments that we got, we would improve the shots.

Sienna added that the professor's hands-on approach in her class including involving the students in the sessions made such a difference to her that:

If all classes were structured the same way, I would have preferred online, but unfortunately, not all online classes are as organized [so] I prefer in-person classes. Comparing this class to all the other online classes that I've taken before, I feel like I liked this class better because I got to show my screen, I got to show my part, and other classes [had] only the professor talking [and] sharing his screen and other people would not even be listening, wouldn't even be asking questions. But with that one, my involvement was required and very welcomed.

All eight participants talked about how professors sharing their real-life, relevant experiences in the virtual sessions helped in their learning. For example, Nick shared his appreciation for his professor sharing their relevant personal experiences with what the class was learning, while Christopher relayed how his professor would relate the concepts discussed in a presentation to real-life scenarios at the end of the presentation. Kate discussed her perception of the effects of her professor sharing extra links and knowledge with the class:

I don't want to say [they] go off script. It's not that I don't know how to term it otherwise, but they go into more details or they explain things or give real life examples, I find that absolutely helpful because it shows they are human, it shows they have the skills and relatability, like he [the professor] gave an example for, you know, a job he had in something he encountered, you know, in management, and he had us, you know, try to apply that in our own lives with jobs we had. So, again it comes back to the real-world experience and what we're actually going to learn but it highlights as a professor or teacher, you know, you know, what you're

talking about because you're sharing something that all of us can relate to in a different way that's not necessarily in the book.

While the time spent in the virtual classroom before the class began seemed to focus on casual discussion, time spent after the virtual sessions seemed more focused on content and students' questions about the course. For example, William related that after a virtual session ended officially, his professor would say that the students could leave if they wanted to but if they had questions [about the course], they could stay.

## **Theme 2: Faculty Social Presence and Advancing Learning in Asynchronous Interactions**

Whether or not the participants reported actually contacting their professors during their class, responsiveness and availability were mentioned by multiple participants as important in terms of their sense of the professor's presence and the professor being there for them. Christopher said that his professor "would always respond within 24 hours, which is very nice to have when you're doing online course work that's due at the end of each week. That's where that presence is felt: in expediency and answering emails." Olivia echoed Christopher's view of the importance of quick replies from the professor by email, saying, "Quick responses to email. I think the response time is huge." Sienna said simply that it was a relief to her when the professor expressed their availability for students. Lindsey said it helped when her professor "let the class know like they're available or like they want you to succeed or, like, are there to help you and, like, support you along the way." She added:

Honestly all my professors have been like incredible; they're so easy to get ahold of [and] like, they reply within, like, probably less than 24 hours. There was one instance where I got locked out of a test; it just like froze in the middle of it.

And it was like, a Saturday at like 10 p.m. I was like, "I'm so sorry to bother you like, you don't have to address this until like the next day but is there any way you can fix this?" and they replied to me at like 11 o'clock at night.

All eight participants talked about appreciating when their professors actively participated in the course. A practice that several students said helped establish their sense of the professor and that in turn helped their learning was the use of discussions where the professor and students participated, whether in discussion forums in the classroom or in the live virtual sessions. Question and answer segments within the live sessions were mentioned by several students. Morgan said:

I think, active participation is kind of my buzzword for the whole thing because that's how students get A's, and I think that's the same way that professors can get metaphorical A's as well. And it doesn't always have to look the same, but I think being a part of the discussion is good, even if it's via email, even if it's in the discussion posts; probably weekly check-ins are a minimum thing. And then I also really think feedback is important as well.

Several students spoke in particular about professors participating in the discussion forums. On the subject of professors participating in the class discussion forums, Kate said:

I also think it shows how they highlight and care about their students and also again with the feedback with having those forums that we have every week, like we always have a class discussion. Those class discussions, that is the only that chance to, you know, get to know your classmates and their feedback and then, you know, utilize that you are understanding and learning the material but when your professor actually responds in those, I think that is great because I'm like if they have a follow-up question or they want you to look at it a different way or take the information differently, that's a good opportunity for them to respond. And not all professors do that.

Morgan shared her perception of how active participation by a professor looks for her in online discussion forums for the class:

Right, you can tell what professors are active participants in their own classes. When you like, respond to students' discussion posts and you say, "Oh, that reminds me of this other thing, reference, Here's the link," you become a, you're a part of the conversation. Sometimes especially online, it's easy for the professor to lay out a course plan, plop it online, and then kind of walk away and just be like, "Yeah, I'll be available; 24- to 48-hour response on email." I've had those professors, but also [professors] that are also active participants who are reading the discussion posts along with the students and putting some blurbs here and there.

Morgan added:

Professors responding to some discussions, those things, they affect your perceptions of how the professor was present or involved, you know, in your class. I think that means that they are checking in more often and kind of lurking around the discussion and keeping an eye on the way that like, yeah, this could happen like if you had discussions in class, the professor would be there the entire time making commentary, listening to students, hearing what everyone has to say. And so, to see that that's the only way that you could really actively do that here online would be to kind of respond here and there, or even if it wasn't a response directly in the discussion, when you grade, you can leave little comments. I find that to be like, oh, they actually read what I had to say; they didn't just say, all right, rubric, yep, yep, yep, move on.

All eight participants preferred emails as a way for professors to communicate with them outside of the virtual meetings. While the emails generally focused on class topics, participants also talked about how the emails affected their perceptions of the professors. Morgan mentioned how her professor sent weekly emails that welcomed students to the week and listed what students needed to do that week. Morgan added, "What I also liked about her was she would say, you know, good luck or let me know if you need anything."

Kate talked about the impact of emails from her professor on Kate's perceptions of the professor's social presence: "They're just an extra follow up so that to me is important and I like that. [It's] Like they're involved and like you know they're out there. Yeah, you're not on your own." Although it did not occur in the class she discussed for



this study, Kate commented on the effect of having few emails, no live virtual sessions, and not much other contact with that professor: “We had no [virtual] meetings, no emails. We had nothing. And she was like, ‘Well, you can reach out for help if you need it.’ It was like teaching myself from a book.”

Nick also said how important he feels emails from the professor are to his sense of the professor’s presence and involvement with the class.

She breaks them down to remind you what the assignments are about, what needs to be in them, what's expected of you, but then they also go on to talk about, like, she's talked about her dogs before and sent us pictures of her dogs. And I thought that was really cute. I would say it was more so academic instructions, but there was a little flair of personality in there, so you can tell it's still a person; it wasn't just like a robot, or something. I think it's just adding a little bit of personality and some stuff that you would get from an in-person class, adding that to the kind of digital correspondence that you're getting now but you feel like you're connected and things like that. Otherwise, it feels kind of like you're just, you signed up for a class and you're just taking it on your own and just trying to do the best you can.

Christopher shared why he feels that online students view email communications with their professors so positively:

A difference with online students versus others, like with on-campus students, is that because online students have to use, like their email is their lifeblood with the courses, which makes them more responsive to email than people who are in a

face-to-face situation where they can ignore their email because they'll see that person in person.

In contrast to how the participants felt that emails from their professors helped the professors demonstrate their social presence, all of the participants except one, Lindsey, the youngest participant, preferred not to text with their professors. Christopher said, "The least helpful thing to me would be the text [texting] because I just didn't utilize it. I'm not comfortable with sharing my personal phone number, and that's just who I am as a person."

Participants' desire for boundaries with their professors also showed in participants' comments about texting: Morgan said:

I do really appreciate quick responses, but I would probably never text a professor. Because I do, I do kind of sometimes view professors like a manager or supervisor above me. You know I would never want to, like, casually text them and so I would email them. It would be nice if they said, "Ok, if you've got a question, text me;" that would be great but I'm not going to. With professors, I would say, texting is fine for emergencies, but emails are better for everything else.

Christopher added, "Texting, in my head, it's all very informal like I text my friends. It just doesn't click in that learning part of my brain." Lindsey, on the other hand, saw texting with a professor in a more positive light, saying, "So another thing I wasn't used to is all my professors have just given their cell phone out and are like, 'Text me if you need anything ever.' So that's really been great."

Multiple participants cited their professors' feedback as a way in which their professors demonstrated their social presence and involvement, and, through the feedback, helped the students learn. Sienna noted that personalized feedback from her professor is "exactly what makes me learn." Morgan said:

It's huge. [Feedback gives] the little inklings of like, "I'm here, I'm paying attention, I'm a part of this as well, I didn't just lay out the course, and kind of walk away." I just cared about, like, are they a part of this with me and do they care? Do they care that I know what's going on? Those kind of things like feedback that gave you a specific, you know, why you got whatever it was. Yeah, 100% is great but why did I get it, or yeah, like I got a 97 and I cited something wrong, but then you don't tell me what the right way is or what was actually wrong about it, you just say, "Citing was wrong."

Lengthy feedback did not always mean more helpful feedback, according to Lindsey:

He [the professor] writes like the longest feedback, I would say, but never actually tells you how to improve, like it's all just kind of condescending. It was a good length, like, review, but it didn't actually give how he wanted you to actually improve anything, like what changes you could make to, like, get a better grade or what he actually wanted to see from you.

Nick said that the way that a professor handled feedback negatively affected his perceptions of the professor's presence and involvement as well as his learning, "I've noticed that with [the professor's] decreased enthusiasm or interest in the class, it's

hindered the educational [a] little bit because like, I [was] still waiting to get grades on assignments I submitted like three weeks [before] and notes on those.”

Another pragmatic way that four of the participants mentioned as a way their professors demonstrated their social presence was by using a class calendar to show the students what was due when and other important class dates. Nick shared:

I would say that [what] definitely [gives] a sense of involvement and presence is having a very well put-together course calendar because it would show that the teacher is very invested in you being as successful as possible in the course. The calendar should be very explicit and list every single thing that is due: meeting times, every single assignment, discussion board, everything to do.

The detail and accuracy of the calendar were noted as important as well. Nick said:

In one of my courses, it was not a great course calendar, and I was following the course calendar. And I apparently missed some assignments because it wasn't on the calendar. I think it [a well put-together course calendar] would be very beneficial not just to me but to like any student and class for the course.

Olivia said that one way her professor demonstrated social presence was to include appointment times on a calendar where students could schedule time with the professor: “Like if I wanted to talk about anything I could schedule half an hour with her, and she'd be like what can I do for you? And we'd just talk it through.” She added, “I think the calendar is huge.” In contrast to the opinions of the other participants regarding the helpfulness of class calendars to demonstrate social presence, Sienna reported that she

doesn't use calendars much because she goes into the classroom each day and looks at her assignments.

All of the participants mentioned professors' followup such as by email on items discussed in the virtual meetings or in areas where their professor noticed students were having trouble as helpful ways that their professors demonstrated their presence and involvement while also helping the students learn. Talking about his professor, Christopher said:

And if he didn't have an answer, like, a direct answer to the question, he would point you to a section of the textbooks he thought the answer would be in, and then usually send a follow-up email within an hour of that first email if he found additional information.

Similarly, Morgan talked about how her professor's follow-up helped demonstrate the professor's social presence as well as helped with her learning: "[The professor] would say, 'Here's your wrap-up from last week,' and things like, 'I noticed some people were having issues with x y z; here's how you cite. Here's how to deal with run-on sentences or here's a resource.'"

Several participants said they felt their professors demonstrated their presence and by how the professor prepared the classroom and how they prepared the students for the classroom and class, actions that the participants said contributed to a better learning experience for them. Kate said that she sees the professor's presence and involvement when they make sure all the articles are there that should be and that all the links work correctly. Morgan echoed the idea of how the professor being prepared and anticipating

the students' needs demonstrated the professor's social presence and helped in the learning process, "I think she thinks ahead, and says, 'How can I be accessible, and relatable to students?' I think that came through a lot in the way [she] would anticipate questions and then kind of answer those beforehand."

Olivia relayed an experience where she felt as though her professor could have shared her experience to help the students. In this situation, the professor asked students ahead of the class whether they preferred to meet once a week for 90 minutes or twice a week for an hour. While Olivia said she had appreciated being asked what she preferred, she added that the professor:

didn't really put the choice of whether to meet once a week for 90 minutes or twice a week for an hour into context. What we didn't realize is that she couldn't cover all the information for each week in 90 minutes. Had she said that up front, I think some people--I know I would have--made a different [choice]. Because every week, we would get to the end, and she couldn't finish it. But, as you know, at the end of each chapter just gets harder and harder. So, to me, in the end, I didn't get her knowledge passed down to me about the hardest part of each chapter.

### **Theme 3: Faculty Social Presence and Advancing Learning With Demeanor**

All eight participants mentioned how they felt that aspects of their professors' demeanor demonstrated the professors' social presence and affected the participants' learning. Lindsey shared an experience where her professor's congenial demeanor

demonstrated his social presence and interest in helping her succeed when she had trouble uploading part of an assignment:

I was like really nervous about, like, how like I didn't get like full credit on an assignment when I know I did it all. And he kind of said to me, like, "I'm on your side; like, I'll fix it, it's not a big deal." I felt pretty good about being reassured that it would be, like, corrected.

Talking about how his professor's demeanor affected him as a student, Christopher said, "I felt very comfortable that if I had a problem with an assignment or understanding something, I could go to him [his professor] with it, and he would help me." He added, "I've never once had a professor here say, 'Well, you know that's too bad or I'm going to hold that against you.' They're almost always willing to work with you."

Morgan shared an example of how her professor demonstrated her social presence in the class through her empathy for students:

I didn't, I don't struggle so much with English, but I know we had some people in the class who were English as a second language speakers. She [the professor] was very gracious with them in class and in the discussion board; I like became more impressed over time. I think that if you are going to be a professor at all in the U.S., you have to understand that not everyone is born here and learns to speak English right away. That's crazy.

Five of the participants mentioned how they felt that their professors' apparent comfort with their own and others' gender pronouns demonstrated their awareness and involvement with the students. Morgan said:

I think it makes them [professors] seem more society aware; it makes them seem more open to students having any identity. I mean we've hit this point in society; the younger generations, they're on board, moving with it. So, there's no going back. There's only hitting the curve ahead of time and setting a standard that we're already going towards or being late.

Other participants shared different experiences related to how their professors' demeanors affected how the participants feel about the professor's social presence involvement and how they perceive it affects their learning. Kate said: "If a professor seems more standoffish, I know me, and I'm sure other students, are hesitant to reach out for help." Similarly, William said: "If I'm reaching out to you and it's, it seems like you don't want to answer me or you're telling me to go research on it, then I will stop asking for your help." While talking about how professors seeming approachable demonstrates their social presence to her, Morgan explained how she felt that a professor's approachability affects learning:

I don't think approachability teaches anyone anything, but, you know, I think it opens the door to learning. I think there are always going to be students who are like, well, this is just English 100 and if I don't know these minimal things, I'm going to be stupid if I ask. So, I think being approachable kind of alleviates that.

Nick discussed how a professor's demeanor affected his perception of the professor's social presence in the class as well as Nick's perception of the learning experience:

I might type out like a fairly longwinded email, or something because I tried to stay approachable, polite, and easy to communicate with, and they would come



back with something just real short and ignoring most of the email and just to the point; that's it. And I would say that just, it makes it feel cold, you know? I would say something that would be most helpful to me as a learner is, in addition to a very present professor, [one] that's kind of like outgoing, positive, and communicates very well.

Nick further explained how he's had "some really positive experiences where the professor's very present, but I've also had some not-so-great ones, like my very first programming class I ever took was online." Nick continued:

I had actually reached out to the professor, and I was like, "Hey, I'm really struggling here, is there any way that we can set up a time to meet and you can kind of like help me understand this?" This was before the pandemic. And they just emailed back and said, "No, this is an online class; it's the student's problem to try to absorb all the knowledge and interpret it correctly.

Olivia highlighted the importance of feeling comfortable with an online professor, saying that if you're not feeling like things are good with your professor in an online class, "it's a sense of being alone. You can't look at others' faces" [to see how they feel].

On a lighter note, several participants cited both a sense of humor and the use of emojis as a way that professors demonstrate their social presence through their demeanor. Kate said, "This is going to sound cheesy, but I love when professors have a sense of humor and they're able to relax." Morgan talked about her professor's use of humor in her weekly welcome emails: "She was cute; she always put some kind of meme in the, in the little Welcome to This Week." Christopher commented, "This may seem silly but like

with any professor who, you know, you're emailing with them, and then occasionally they throw like an emoji or an LOL in there, it makes them seem more real.”

Despite the participants’ appreciation of their professors demonstrating their social presence and involvement with the students with a pleasant, approachable demeanor, all eight participants made it clear that although they want their professors to be friendly and approachable, they do not want to be friends with their professors.

William explained:

I would probably like to know about maybe 10% or 20% of my professor’s life but that's about it. I don't want to know half of their life. I'm personally not interested because I'm not in a relationship with them; I'm not looking to be in a relationship with them. I don't want a friendship. If a teacher said, like, “hey, follow me on this Facebook page” or “this is my Facebook” or, “here's my number, you know, we can do group chat if you want,” personally, I'm not getting into it.

Morgan shared, “So if I think I would have reached out to any professor that if I needed something, would they help me, and I mattered; yes, [but] I don't think we're friends.”

Despite not wanting to be friends with their professors, all eight participants talked about having respect for their professors. As one example, despite their stated desire for responsiveness from their professors, several of the participants expressed their belief that professors are people, too, and they have lives and do not have to reply immediately all the time. Morgan said:

So there, there are some professors; they have good boundaries. They're like, "Don't email me last minute, but do email me if you have questions early on." I think there's kind of like, they respect their time and they're going to respect mine as well. She added that students should respect their professors' boundaries such as not contacting them at dinnertime or nighttime. "I think if we all have boundaries with each other, we're going to build respect. Professors should set their expectations so you wouldn't have to wonder if it's OK to call or text or whatever."

Six of the participants noted how their perceptions of their professors' demeanors were associated with recognition that they are adult learners at a university for adult students. Lindsey discussed her appreciation as an adult learner concerning her professor's flexibility:

One good thing he did was to have two weekly [virtual meeting] options because it's like an adult-focused university, like people's schedules are really busy, so he offered like a Monday session, and then also like a Wednesday at different times. So, I thought that was nice to allow for like flexibility.

Kate also said that she appreciated her professor recognizing that the students had other responsibilities, "He always was very conscientious of time . . . [and] trying to get us out of there [so] we could go back to our families and things we had [to do]." Olivia shared how being an adult student affected how she coped with a professor whom she found difficult to get along with:

I just didn't care how she talked to me or how she treated me. I just wanted to get a good grade. But you have to remember I'm also older. And I don't know if I was 19 or 20, how that would have gone over with me.

While still making it clear that she finds professors with pleasant demeanors more helpful in her learning experience, Morgan shared that she felt that a good thing about adult learners is:

They don't get all their confidence only from school, like, they have jobs, and, you know, social groups or family groups so they're like, "So what if this one random person I'll never see in my life thinks that was a dumb question" but you know when you're [younger and only] in college, that's your whole world.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I discussed the setting for the study, pertinent demographics of the participants, the data-collection procedures, and the process used for the data analysis. I presented and discussed results from the study including the codes and themes that I identified. I also addressed issues of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this chapter. In Chapter 5 I discuss my interpretation of the findings, the limitations of the study, my recommendations for future research, the implications of the study for positive social change, and recommendations for practice. I end the chapter with a conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I conducted this basic qualitative study to determine how postsecondary students taking online gateway classes at a 4-year, nonprofit, private, adult-focused university in the U.S. Midwest perceived faculty social presence in those classes and how they felt that social presence affected their learning. In alignment with this purpose, the research questions addressed how the students perceived faculty social presence in those classes and how they perceived that social presence affected their learning.

The nature of this study was qualitative, and I used a basic descriptive design, as articulated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). The qualitative research approach aligned with my goal to explore the perceptions of postsecondary students about faculty social presence in their online classes. I recruited postsecondary students who had completed at least one fully online gateway (i.e., entry) course at the university since January 2019. I virtually interviewed eight students and analyzed the data using open coding to derive themes.

Key findings in this study centered on the following three themes that emerged from the data analysis: faculty social presence and advancing learning in synchronous virtual sessions, faculty social presence and advancing learning in asynchronous interactions, and faculty social presence and advancing learning with demeanor. Each of the three themes applied to both research questions, although in different ways. In this chapter, I discuss my interpretation of the findings, the limitations of the study, my recommendations for future research, the implications of the study for positive social change, and my recommendations for practice. I end the chapter with a conclusion.

## **Interpretation of the Findings**

The interpretation of the findings is organized by the three themes that emerged from data analysis related to the framework and empirical literature discussed in Chapter 2 of this study. The framework was based on Garrison's (2017) concept of social presence, which focuses on how individuals identify with others in a group, communicate intentionally when they feel they can trust the environment, and develop relationships with others in the group by establishing themselves through their own personalities. As discussed in Chapter 2, the construct of social presence, including definitions and conceptual frameworks, varies based on the many researchers' perspectives (for analysis of multiple perspectives see Richardson et al., 2017; Swan, 2017) and continues to be researched.

### **Faculty Social Presence and Advancing Learning in Synchronous Virtual Sessions**

Garrison (2017) argued that the ways in which professors demonstrate their social presence and the strategies they use may need to vary depending on the needs of a specific class. For example, students with more experience in higher education and online learning than others, such as in senior-level classes in an online-only university, may prefer different types and amounts of faculty social presence than do students who are new to both higher education and online learning.

Findings in this study reflected in the first theme, faculty social presence and advancing learning in synchronous virtual sessions, included different students preferring different types and amounts of faculty social presence as Garrison (2017) discussed. For example, while all eight participants felt that their professors demonstrated their social

presence most fully in the synchronous virtual sessions, some participants found it most helpful when their professors used hands-on interactions in the virtual sessions. In addition, although most of the participants said that the professor sharing information and demonstrations on that week's material closely related to the book and assignments was the most helpful to their learning, Olivia said that the most helpful thing a professor can do to help her learn in a class is to, during the first virtual meeting, show the students the various classroom features that will be used in the class. Other participants, including Morgan, Sienna, and Kate, emphasized the importance of a professor's attention to the students during the virtual sessions for them to learn best. These results related to the first theme support Garrison's recommendation that professors and others, such as course designers, consider using different strategies to demonstrate social presence depending on the characteristics of a specific course and the needs of the students.

The first theme also aligned with Garrison's (2017) argument that demonstrating faculty social presence in a university setting should include creating a learning environment that welcomes differing views and where opposing viewpoints can be discussed without the students worrying about consequences. This way of showing faculty social presence is more than being polite for social purposes; instead, it allows students to see their professors as approachable from a professional or learning perspective (Garrison, 2017). Kim and Lundberg (2016) reported in an empirical study that increased levels of student-faculty interaction were associated with students who reported that they then interacted more and engaged more frequently in critical reasoning in the classroom; that higher level of engagement was in turn associated with increased

levels of cognitive development. Watson et al. (2017) reported that the most effective aspects of faculty-student interactions were the professors' availability and responsiveness to the students, the professors' willingness to interact and engage with the students, and the efforts made by the faculty to encourage communication and interactions, while Lundberg et al. (2018) found that the two strongest predictors of students' perceptions of increased learning were how driven the students were to meet their professors' expectations and the availability of the faculty to the students. Specific examples supporting these concepts and findings in the current study include Sienna discussing how her professors encouraged students to share different perspectives, which helped her develop her critical-thinking and public-speaking skills, while Lindsey spoke about how her professor's seemingly negative responses to different viewpoints decreased her inclinations to share her ideas and adversely affected her learning. All eight participants discussed how professors sharing their real-life, relevant experiences in the virtual sessions helped them learn. Faculty social presence in less formal circumstances, such as in the virtual meeting room before class started, were also noted as helpful to the participants' learning. Multiple participants mentioned how the chatting with their professors informally in the virtual meeting room before class started officially helped them feel like their professor was involved with them.

Results from this study also supported the research of Garrison (2017) and Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) who found that the techniques and tools themselves are not what matters in demonstrating faculty social presence. How the technology and strategies are used and the effects on the students in a specific class are, instead, what matters most



(Garrison, 2017; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). While all the participants in this study talked about how helpful they found the virtual sessions and the discussion forums when their professors were active in them, the participants' comments focused on the way their professors interacted with them rather than the delivery modality. Similarly, although all of the participants reported feeling that the faculty were more present and involved when the professors used their webcams for at least part of the meeting, none of the comments talked about how clear a webcam was or anything else related to the technical qualities of the professors' webcams; the participants just seemed to be glad that the professors used the webcams.

Theme 1 seems to align with the findings of research studies showing that students' perceptions of their professors' social presence in online classes may affect the students' learning, such as students' levels of motivation and course completion (Robb & Sutton, 2014), affective learning (Russo & Benson, 2005), student satisfaction (Russo & Benson, 2005; Wise et al., 2004), and perceived and actual learning (Hostetter & Busch, 2013; Kang & Im, 2013). The results of the current study also appear to be supported by research studies that found that student-faculty interactions, which may be viewed both as an element of faculty social presence and as a result of faculty social presence, had significant effects on student learning, such as in gains in general education, career preparation, and personal development (Astin, 1993; Lundberg et al., 2018). Richardson and Swan (2003) found that higher levels of students' perceptions of social presence were associated with higher levels of perceived learning in those students as well as the students' level of satisfaction with their professors.

### **Faculty Social Presence and Advancing Learning in Asynchronous Interactions**

As with the findings for the first theme, results related to the second theme, faculty social presence and advancing learning in asynchronous interactions, aligned with Garrison's (2017) assertion that professors should consider individual differences, such as with students in different courses and with different tasks. Individual differences among students concerning how faculty social presence is demonstrated and how that social presence affected the students' learning varied more when discussing asynchronous interactions than when they talked about the synchronous virtual sessions. Just as discussed above concerning faculty social presence in the synchronous virtual sessions, findings from this study also supported the idea that the techniques and tools themselves are not what matters in demonstrating faculty social presence; instead, what is most important is the effects on the students in a specific class (see Garrison, 2017; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). Although participants talked about how helpful they found the discussion forums when faculty participated in them just as they discussed the virtual sessions, their comments were almost entirely concerned with the way the professor interacted with them rather than the delivery modality. All eight participants also reported their preferences for asynchronous interactions using the discussion forums and emails; only one of the participants was interested in texting with the professor, and none of the participants wanted to interact with their professors using social media, such as Facebook. Christopher noted that he and other online students might be more attuned to checking their emails than students in face-to-face classes are because online students are not going to see their professors several times a week in class and all their school

experience is online, so it is natural for them. Many of the participants said that they have their emails forwarded to their smartphones, enabling them to stay current even more quickly.

Purarjomandlangrudi and Chen's (2019) finding that functional, reliable technology that students could easily use was more important to student involvement than new or interesting technology alone was seen in the responses in the current study. None of the eight participants mentioned anything about factors, like cutting-edge videos or elaborate presentations; their concerns focused on knowing that they could reach the online classroom and use its components in their efforts to earn their degrees. The results of this study were somewhat similar to Lowenthal and Dunlap's (2018) findings related to students' preferred methods of faculty social presence. In that study, students listed detailed online feedback on their assignments, individualized emails, and how-to videos as their preferred methods. As with the findings in this study, the participants in Lowenthal and Dunlap reported student-faculty interactions using Twitter; an online, collaborative activity in Google, and an online question-answering service called Just Ask Zoltar as the least effective of the 24 technological methods used in the class to demonstrate faculty social perspective.

Although participants in this study did not list feedback on assignments as one of the main ways that they felt that faculty demonstrated social presence in a way that helped the students learn, several participants said that specific and, more importantly, reasonably fast feedback were helpful methods. Regarding feedback, Purarjomandlangrudi and Chen (2019) found that a lack of quick, real-time feedback to

the students in the discussion forums was a factor in decreased student motivation and involvement in those forums. Indeed, multiple participants in the current study talked about the difference that professors' participation in the discussion forums made to them and their learning. Kate spoke about how professors participating in the discussion forums showed how the professors care about the students and how it also gives the students and professor the opportunity to discuss questions students have about the content and for the professor to provide more insights. Morgan framed this practice as professors becoming part of the conversation and being an active participant in the course. Every participant found it helpful for their learning when professors participated in the discussion forums.

Other research on discussion posts found that the type of posts made by the professor in the discussion forums was more important to students' perceptions of their learning than the number of posts was. Posts from professors that added content or resources to help students learn increased students' perceptions of learning more than posts that focused on encouraging students, promoting the discussion, or summarizing the discussion did (Hoey, 2017). Hoey (2017) also found that when professors included information about their lives or commented on aspects of the students' lives if the students previously had written about those items, that the students' views of the quality of the course and the professor improved significantly. Based on these findings, Hoey concluded that the conversational posts increased the professor's social presence or relatability by revealing their personality, character, or perspective about situations and events. Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) also reported that faculty sharing personal aspects

of their lives in discussion forums helped increase their faculty social presence in their online courses. Here again, Garrison (2017) cautioned that the specifics of each class should be considered when deciding on the strategies to use to demonstrate faculty social presence.

The participants in the current study seemed to prefer comments related to the course, including additional explanations, links, and stories about the professors' real-life experiences related to the source material. Based on their responses overall, it seems less likely that they would want to hear about their professors' personal lives in these forums, although maybe likely that they might appreciate professors' responses on the students' comments about their own personal lives. Context and individual differences of the students and class seem important here (Garrison, 2017).

Multiple participants noted how they felt that being an adult learner made them more motivated to learn and make progress as efficiently as possible as well as that it helped them achieve when they knew their professors were involved and cared about the students' learning. All the participants discussed how responsiveness and availability were vital in how they felt that the professor was present in the class and there for them. Christopher associated a 24-hour response time to emails as, "where that presence is felt: in expediency and answering emails." Other participants, such as Olivia, Sienna, and Lindsay, echoed their appreciation and even relief when their professors responded to them within 24 to 48 hours.

### **Faculty Social Presence and Advancing Learning With Demeanor**

The findings associated with the third theme, faculty social presence and advancing learning with demeanor, support some of the research literature discussed in Chapter 2; other findings such as those related to professors' levels of self-disclosure did not support the research literature. Related to demeanor, Lundberg et al. (2018) found that students' perceptions of how available, helpful, and sympathetic their professors were, one of seven measures explored, had significant influences on the students' perceptions of their learning. Garrison (2017) and Richardson et al. (2017) discussed how students and professors getting to know each other as individuals with their own personalities and preferences could help improve students' perceptions of their professors' social presence, with possible benefits such as increased student perceptions of their learning as a result. Dumford and Miller (2018) also said that if online students and faculty spent more time getting to know each other including about their personal backgrounds, the quality of student interactions, collaborative learning, and discussions with diverse others could be strengthened. Trolan et al. (2016) found that increased levels of students' perceptions of the quality of their interactions with their professors, the frequency of their interactions with their professors, the time they spent working on research with faculty, personal conversations between the students and their professors, and student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom resulted in increases in students' levels of academic motivation.

The findings in this study strongly confirmed Lundberg et al.'s (2018) research showing that students' perceptions of how available, helpful, and sympathetic their

professors significantly affected the students' perceptions of their learning. Olivia discussed how uncomfortable and alone she felt when things weren't going well with her professor especially since she could not just look at other students as in a face-to-face class to see how they were reacting. Several participants commented about how a professor's sense of humor and the use of emojis are ways that professors demonstrated their social presence through their demeanor in positive ways. Morgan discussed how her professors included a funny meme in the weekly welcome-to-the-week emails and Christopher said that when a professor uses an emoji or an LOL in an email, it made the professor seem more real.

As Lundberg et al.'s (2018) study found, participants in this study relayed how their professors' helpful, sympathetic demeanors showed their social presence and interest in helping them succeed. As an example, Lindsey shared how she felt when she had trouble uploading an assignment and contacted her professor: "And he kind of said to me, like, 'I'm on your side; like, I'll fix it, it's not a big deal.' I felt pretty good about being reassured that it would be, like, corrected." As another example, Morgan talked about how her professor showed empathy for students in the class who spoke English as a second language and was actively supportive regarding students' preferred pronouns. Also in alignment with Lundberg et al.'s findings, some participants in this study talked about how what the students perceived as a professor's negative demeanor affected how the participants felt about the professor's involvement and how they perceived that negative demeanor as affecting their learning. Kate said: "If a professor seems more standoffish, I know me, and I'm sure other students, are hesitant to reach out for help."

William shared how if he felt a professor didn't want to answer his questions or hear from him, he'd just quit reaching out to the professor, while Nick said that, as a learner, it helped him when a professor was outgoing, positive, and communicated very well in addition to being present and involved.

Related to participants' desire for their professors to be approachable and to care about the students' learning and success, six of the participants talked about how their perceptions of their professors' demeanors were associated with the professors' level of recognition that participants are adult learners at a university for adult students. Lindsey discussed her professor's flexibility in scheduling synchronous virtual meetings to try to accommodate more students, Kate said she felt that her professor demonstrated his concern for students by being careful of the time in synchronous sessions, and Morgan shared that although she finds professors with pleasant demeanors more helpful to her learning, she is glad that adult learners like her don't have to depend on school for all their confidence since they have jobs, experience, and families. Similarly, Olivia discussed how while she could handle unpleasant experiences with her professor as an adult learner because she just wanted to get a good grade, she did not know how she would have felt if she were younger with less life experience. These findings support those from Abdrahim's (2020) research that found that adult learners navigate their online courses in a dynamic process, adjusting frequently to circumstances they encounter including the specific characteristics of the class such as the professors themselves while balancing their other responsibilities such as at work and home. As a result, students in Abdrahim's study, like the participants in this study, were found to



prioritize flexible and personalized learning including flexible scheduling and a variety of learning techniques and resources to help them manage both their learning and the other aspects of their lives.

One strategy that adult online learners used in adjusting their responses to commitments from school to their work and personal lives was to focus on determining what their professors wanted from them beyond the specific instructions in the syllabi and assignments based on the professors' tone and other clues such as what the professors emphasized as important through their comments and actions (Abdrahim, 2020). In other words, the adult online learners seemed to view their professors as conduits to learning rather than as opportunities for establishing personal relationships, with the students' classes being part of a combined set of commitments, each sometimes affecting the others. Findings in this study seemed to align with that kind of goal-oriented approach and the demanding schedules of the students. While participants in this study reported wanting to get to know a little about their professors as individuals and appreciating professors whom they felt had positive personalities as indicated by words like warm and approachable, all eight made it clear that they were not interested in learning too much about their professors as people or in becoming friends. Things that participants said they liked to know about their professors were more related to the professors' education and experience, especially the professors' real-life experiences that related to the course content. Some of the participants mentioned they liked it when their professor shared photos or their pets or talked a little about their pets and hobbies but none of them wanted to know about the professors' personal lives in detail. For example, although William

said that talking with the professor casually in the virtual meeting before the class began made it seem like they were friends, and it was not just a business relationship. At the same time, all eight participants spoke about respecting their professors and their boundaries, as they wanted professors to respect theirs.

Research into the effects of different strategies and technologies to increase student-faculty interactions through faculty social presence focused on a variety of methods related to professors' demeanors. As Garrison (2017) noted, however, how faculty social presence is demonstrated in an online class should be based on the particular class from the professor to the course subject matter and levels to the students. For example, it may be that students like these at a university focused on adult learners have different preferences than students attending traditional colleges might. Based on the participants' responses in this study, techniques that some or all reported as being desirable to help them their professors express their personality and involvement in the class include the synchronous virtual sessions, bios (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017) such as in a welcome announcement or email for students that goes beyond the institutional details of the class but is not too personal; photographs (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Richardson et al., 2017) if they were not too personal such as showing the professor's family; discussion posts (Hoey, 2017; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018), feedback on discussion posts (Thomas et al., 2017), individualized feedback (Glazier, 2016; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018), links to pertinent YouTube videos (Glazier, 2016) and other materials related to the class, and motivational

emails (Robb & Sutton, 2014) as a way to demonstrate faculty social presence with less personal self-disclosure.

Other techniques discussed in the research literature that would seem to be deemed less effective by the participants in this study in demonstrating their professors' social presence and thus demeanor include an in-class social-media platform (Quong et al., 2018) and faculty videos with reminders (Glazier, 2016) because the participants in this study preferred emails as quick ways to be updated. While a practice Glazier (2016) used in a study on techniques to increase student-faculty rapport of sending students personalized emails seems like a reasonable way to enhance a professor's social presence, it was not mentioned during this study by participants. While asynchronous videos on classroom activities (Bialowas & Steimel, 2019; Thomas et al., 2017) could be a useful strategy for professors demonstrating their social presence, participants in this study focused on their regular synchronous virtual meetings, which were recorded for later review if a student desired. While Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) reported encouraging students to share about themselves using video, asynchronous discussion forums, Twitter, and music with the professors responding, the participants in my study did not seem likely to do so in any way except possible in the discussion forums.

The findings of this study also seem to support Astin's (1999) argument that frequent student-faculty interactions, which are inherent in demonstrating faculty social presence, are strongly associated with postsecondary students' levels of satisfaction. In specific, the higher levels of satisfaction reported by postsecondary students who often interacted with their professors extended beyond the classroom to such areas as how

satisfied the students were with the school, their friends, the courses available, and the learning environment. Although participants in this study did not mention their friends, those who reported positive experiences with how their professors demonstrated their social presence and how that social presence helped the participants learn spoke very positively about the school, the courses, and their learning. The participants who reported less satisfactory experiences with their professors in terms of the professors' social presence and how the participants felt that presence affected their learning seemed to be less happy with their educational experiences than the others did, and all noted that their experiences with other professors had been better.

### **Limitations of the Findings**

Limitations to trustworthiness noted in the execution of the study included the self-selection of participants for the study, possible faulty memories of the participants about faculty social presence in their online classes, and possible lack of awareness by the students about their experiences. Self-selection was a limitation since it was clear during the course of the interviews that some participants were passionate students who wanted to share their mostly positive experiences while a few others wanted to share negative experiences they had had, not necessarily with a professor's social presence and the perceived effects on that participant's learning, but sometimes in other areas not related to the research questions such as with the university overall. Those negative feelings may have affected the participants' perceptions regarding faculty social presence.

Since it had been a few months or more since the participants had taken the online classes they discussed, it is possible that their memories about their professors' social presence in the classes were faulty. It also is possible that the participants lacked awareness about some experiences they may have had. Participants' memories and awareness about the faculty social presence in the classes they discussed also may have been affected by the disruptions to their lives as a result of the COVID pandemic. Some of the participants had lost jobs, moved, started working from home, or suddenly had their children at home including in their own online classes. Others had transitioned to taking only online classes when they previously had taken both online and face-to-face classes.

Limitations related to transferability included that although many U.S. postsecondary institutions in the Midwest offer online gateway courses, those classes may not be set up in the same way as those at the study site were, with required, synchronous virtual meetings during a class term, for example. Another limitation was that this university is a 4-year, private, nonprofit institution that focuses on serving adult postsecondary learners rather than traditional postsecondary students, a factor that many of the participants noted as a reason why they attended there or why they felt their perceptions might have varied from those they might have had when they were younger or from how traditional university students at a traditional university might feel. An additional limitation to transferability was that there are many definitions of social presence and readers of this study should be focused on Garrison's (2017) concept of social presence.

## **Recommendations**

This study explored the perceptions of participants in online gateway classes of how their professors demonstrated faculty social presence and how the participants perceived that faculty social presence as affecting their learning at the 4-year, private, nonprofit university focused on adult learners that they attended in the U.S. Midwest. Recommendations for further research include those that would go beyond the boundaries of this study, such as to explore the perceptions of students who took online classes other than the gateway courses. This study also did not focus on the experiences of participants' experience who had taken several online classes. Further research might also focus on the perceptions of students in various majors. While participants in this study discussed their experiences in a variety of courses, many of the classes could be taken by those in different majors. Another area that could benefit from further research is the perceptions of students taking online courses where synchronous virtual sessions were not a required element of the courses since all of the participants in this study listed their professors' actions in the synchronous live virtual meetings as the way in which the professors most demonstrated their social presence and where the participants felt that social presence affected their learning.

Other studies have focused on participants' perceived effects of specific ways that professors try to demonstrate their faculty social presence such as using social media, an area that the participants in this study did not report having used, with many volunteering that they would not want to do so even if it were offered. Additional research also might explore how students in for-profit universities or how adult learners in public or for-profit

universities or universities outside of the U.S. Midwest perceive faculty social presence in their online classes and they feel that affects their learning. As all research does, this study provided insights related to the specific research questions or hypothesis and in doing so, led the researcher to ask more questions and to want to explore those questions in other settings, with participants with different demographics, and more.

### **Implications**

Implications for positive social change as a result of this study may stem from the new information added to the body of knowledge in the discipline. The findings of this study focused on the ways that the postsecondary students perceived faculty social presence in their online gateway classes at an adult-focused, nonprofit, 4-year university in the U.S. Midwest and how those students perceived that social presence as affecting their learning. Those results could help others to increase the effectiveness of online learning in similar settings through adjustments in how faculty social presence is demonstrated through the development of practices and policies including the design of online courses, classroom instruction, and faculty development and training. Such changes might lead to increased learning for the students, which might result in more students completing their educational programs and earning their degrees. With more students earning their degrees, positive social change could occur as more students obtain jobs and improve their socioeconomic standing as well as that of their families. The students might also increase their involvement in neighborhood, community, political, religious, and social activities with increased income and status (Trostel, 2015).

As well as having implications for positive social change, the findings also suggest recommendations for practice. Although, as Garrison (2017) cautioned, each class is different and students in one course may have needs that differ from those in other classes or sections, so it seems reasonable that online course designers, faculty, and other might benefit from reviewing these results and considering how they might apply them in their own classrooms, especially for online adult students. One aspect that might merit strong consideration is that of including regular, synchronous virtual class sessions since all of the students in this study noted the increased opportunities for their professors to demonstrate their social presence in live sessions in ways that the students viewed as helping them learn. Another recommendation is for online course designers and professors to consider such aspects as the type and level of course, the subject matter, and other characteristics of the individual courses (Dilling et al., 2020; Garrison, 2017; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Oyarzun et al., 2018, Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017; Robb & Sutton, 2014). Also as other researchers such as Glazier (2016), Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018), Oyarzun et al. (2018), Richardson and Lowenthal (2017), and Robb and Sutton (2014) have recommended, regardless of whether a course has been designed to improve faculty social presence, online professors may want to learn about and try strategies based on the existing research on faculty social presence. As a general recommendation, faculty trainers and professors themselves might want to consider the importance of faculty demeanor in all their interactions with their online students, synchronous and asynchronous, along with recognizing that adult learners like those in this study may have



different perspectives and needs than students who are younger or at different stages of their lives.

### **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to explore the perceptions of postsecondary online adult learners at a 4-year, nonprofit institution in the U.S. Midwest regarding their professors' faculty presence and how the students felt that faculty presence affected their learning. The findings showed that how professors demonstrated social presence affected how students felt about the faculty and course and how students perceived that social presence affected their perceptions of their learning. More specifically, students reported perceiving synchronous virtual meetings, asynchronous interactions, and faculty demeanor as the most important ways that professors demonstrated their social presence and consequently affected the students' learning. Although the transferability of the findings of this study to other settings is unknown, aspects that the adult postsecondary students in this study reported as being significant to them in how their professors demonstrated social presence and how that social presence affected the students' learning seem important for online faculty, course designers, and institutions to consider. Even with a return to face-to-face learning when the effects of the COVID pandemic wane in the United States, online learning seems likely to continue to be a vital component of postsecondary education based on the yearly increases in online classes each year from 2003 to 2019 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, 2020a). Helping online postsecondary students succeed such as by improving faculty social presence in their

classes and, in turn, potentially improving the students' learning seems like an outcome that would benefit not just the students but also all the rest of us in this world we share.

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#### Appendix: Interview Protocol

“Hello, \_\_\_\_\_ (*Participant Name*)! I’m Michelle Turner, the researcher for this study. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study!”  
 “How is your day going?” (*Michelle will respond to the participants’ reply*).

“It is so nice to meet you, \_\_\_\_\_ (*Participant Name*), and I look forward to hearing your thoughts about these interview questions. Before we move onto that, I’d like to share a little more about the study. While you’ve already read some of this in the invitation and informed consent form, I want to make doubly sure that you have all the information needed and to answer any questions you have.

The purpose of this study is to explore postsecondary students’ perceptions of faculty social presence in their online “gateway” (entry) courses at this 4-year, private, non-profit, U.S. Midwestern university that focuses on adult learners and to explore how the postsecondary students perceive the faculty social presence as affecting their learning.

Faculty social presence may be described as the sense you may have of being aware of the presence and involvement of your professor in your online class in terms of being available and approachable to help you and other students learn. While some research on faculty social presence has been done, it has not been explored with postsecondary students taking online gateway (entry) courses at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university that focuses on adult learners. Your responses will help us better understand how students perceive the social presence of their professors in online postsecondary classes at this university and how students feel that the faculty social presence affects their learning. This interview process is scheduled to last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. With your permission, the interview will be recorded using audio only, and I also will take notes. It’s up to you if you want to have the video on although the video will not be recorded, even if you choose to have it on during this interview. Some students prefer not to have the video on due to bandwidth or other issues and that is perfectly fine! Would you like the video on or off? Your choice!” (*I will respond accordingly.*)

“Do you have any questions about the previous statements?” (*If so, I will address those.*)

“Do you give me your consent to continue this interview?” (*If so, I will thank the participant and begin the interview. If not, I will thank the participant and cancel the interview.*)

*(I will not read the RQs to the participants)*

RQ1: How do postsecondary students at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university that focuses on adult learners perceive faculty social presence in their online gateway (entry) classes?

RQ2: How do postsecondary students at a 4-year, private, nonprofit university that focuses on adult learners perceive faculty social presence in their online gateway (entry) classes as affecting their learning?

### **Interview Questions:**

Warm-up questions to put the participant at ease and get context of their experience:

*--Probing questions as needed*

- Would you please tell me a little about yourself?
  - In addition to being a student, do you also work or have other activities or responsibilities like caring for children?
  - Would you tell me about your academic background from high school to college?
  - Would you please tell me about your experience here at the university?
  - When did you start classes here?
  - Have you decided on a particular major or field? Can you tell me about your choice?
  - Why did you decide to take the gateway course, (*name of class*), online?
  - Was this your first online class?
  - Have you attended only online classes, or have you taken face-to-face or hybrid classes here as well?
1. Would you please tell me about your experience, if any, taking online classes before this one? **(RQ1 and RQ2)**  
*--Probing questions as needed*  
 What was that like for you?  
 If you've taken any face-to-face or hybrid classes here at the university, what was that experience like for you?
  2. The next questions are about your general perceptions related to this online class. **(RQ1)**  
 Would you please tell me about your first impression of the class?  
*--Probing questions as needed*  
 After being in the class for a while, did that impression change and if so, how?  
 Would you please tell me about your first impressions of your professor?  
 After being in the class, did your impression of your professor change and if so, how?
  3. What ways did your professor make their presence or involvement known such as by email, in discussion forums, by phone, in Zoom meetings, or text? **(RQ1)**  
*--Probing questions as needed*  
 How do you feel those items affected your perceptions of the professor's presence or involvement in your class?  
 Which of those seemed to convey the professor's presence or involvement best to you?  
 Could you tell me why that is?  
 What would you recommend that professors do to increase the sense that they are present or involved in your class?
  4. Did you attend the weekly live Zoom meetings that your professor held for the class, view the recording of the meeting, or neither? If so, can you tell me why you chose the option you did? **(RQ1)**  
*--Probing questions as needed*

- What was your impression of those meetings?  
How did those meetings affect your perceptions of your professor if at all?
5. Thinking back to the early meetings in the class, how did those meetings affect your perceptions about what your learning experience in the class might be? **(RQ2)**  
*--Probing questions as needed*  
 How did the professor himself or herself affect those perceptions?  
 How present or involved did you feel the professor was in those early meetings?  
 How did you feel about that related to your learning in the class?  
 How approachable and available did you feel the professor would be based on those early meetings??
  6. Thinking back to the later meetings in the class, how did those meetings affect your perceptions about your learning experience in the class? **(RQ2)**  
*--Probing questions as needed*  
 How did the professor himself or herself affect those perceptions?  
 How present or involved did you feel the professor was in those later meetings?  
 How did you feel about that related to your learning in the class?  
 How approachable and available did you feel the professor was based on later meetings?
  7. How do you feel the way the professor demonstrated their presence or involvement in your class such as by email, in discussion forums, by phone, in other Zoom meetings, or text affected your learning in the class? **(RQ2)**  
*--Probing questions as needed*  
 Which of those ways that your professor demonstrated their presence or involvement do you feel was most helpful to your learning?  
 Could you tell me why that is?  
 How do you think professors could demonstrate their presence or involvement in a class to help you learn more effectively?
  8. Related to your experience with the sense of presence or involvement of your professor in your online class, what did you find most helpful to you as a learner? **(RQ2)**  
*--Probing questions as needed*  
 Related to your experience with your sense of the presence or involvement of your professor in your online class, what did you find least helpful to you as a learner?  
 What methods or strategies would you suggest professors try to increase their presence or involvement in your online classes to help you as a learner?
  9. Is there anything else you'd like to add or talk about that I did not ask?  
*--Response*  
*--Probing questions as needed*



10. Do you have any questions for me?