

2021

## Community College Student Persistence in the Online Learning Environment

Lori Tucker  
*Walden University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>

---

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu](mailto:ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu).

# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Lori Tucker

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Heidi Crocker, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Nicolae Nistor, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Dr. Dan Cernusca, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost

Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University

2021

Abstract

Community College Student Persistence in the Online Learning Environment

by

Lori Tucker

MA, Walden University, 2005

BS, Cornerstone University, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2021

## Abstract

Online course enrollment at community colleges has increased in recent years. Student persistence rates in online courses are lower than in traditional face-to-face courses. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore student perceptions of the external and internal factors that contribute to students' persistence in online learning. Rovai's composite persistence model was the conceptual framework used to explore the perceptions of eight students who were 18 and older and had completed a minimum of two online courses within the past 2 years at a Midwest community college in the United States. Findings from inductive coding analysis of semistructured interview data indicated that students perceived that certain individual characteristics, skills, and external factors had a positive influence on their persistence in online courses. Participants also revealed that they were being asked to do tasks online that faculty were not familiar with, indicating a need for faculty to have increased training in online teaching. This study's findings contribute to positive social change by informing the development of strategic initiatives that may improve student persistence in online courses.

Community College Student Persistence in the Online Learning Environment

by

Lori Tucker

MA, Walden University, 2005

BS, Cornerstone University, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2021

## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my dear friend, Carlene Napier, who passed away in April 2021. Carlene supported and encouraged me throughout my dissertation journey. She believed in me when I didn't believe in myself, so I am truly grateful for our friendship.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank God for His guidance and protection throughout this entire process. I humbly thank my husband, Steve, for encouraging me, praying with me, and being there for me when I needed him the most. Thanks to my children for their support and encouragement. I am thankful for my mom, who has always encouraged me to grow and believe in myself. I am grateful for my committee members, Dr. Heidi Crocker, Dr. Nicolae Nistor, and Dr. Dan Cernusca, for their professional guidance and support throughout my dissertation process. I am grateful for my family and friends who were supportive and checked on my progress regularly. I would also like to acknowledge the students who volunteered to participate in my study.

Table of Contents

List of Tables .....v

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....1

    Background.....2

    Problem Statement.....3

    Purpose of the Study.....6

    Research Questions.....7

    Conceptual Framework.....8

    Nature of the Study.....9

    Definitions.....10

    Assumptions.....11

    Scope and Delimitations.....11

    Limitations.....12

    Significance.....12

    Summary.....13

Chapter 2: Literature Review.....14

    Literature Search Strategy.....14

    Conceptual Framework.....15

    Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable.....17

        Community Colleges.....17

        Community College Governance and Accreditation.....18

        Growth of Online Learning in Higher Education.....20

        Growth of Online Learning in Community Colleges.....20



Community College Student Demographics .....	21
Online Learning Barriers .....	22
Student Retention in Online Learning .....	24
Student Persistence in Online Courses .....	26
Community College Online Learning Student Success.....	26
Online Learning Orientation.....	28
Evaluation of Online Programs.....	30
Online Learning Faculty Support.....	30
Online Student Characteristics.....	31
Faculty Employment Status and Workload .....	33
Impact of Blended Learning on Student Persistence .....	33
Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Online Learning.....	35
Summary and Conclusions .....	36
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	38
Research Design and Rationale .....	38
Role of the Researcher .....	39
Methodology .....	40
Participant Selection .....	40
Instrumentation .....	41
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection.....	42
Data Analysis Plan.....	43
Trustworthiness.....	44
Credibility .....	44

Transferability.....	45
Dependability .....	45
Confirmability.....	45
Ethical Procedures .....	46
Summary .....	47
Chapter 4: Results .....	49
Setting .....	49
Data Collection .....	50
Data Analysis .....	52
Findings From Thematic Analysis.....	53
Theme 1: Perceived Influence of Individual Characteristics on Persistence in Online Courses.....	53
Theme 2: Perceived Influence of Student Skills on Persistence in Online Courses.....	54
Theme 3: Perceived Influence of External Factors on Persistence in Online Courses.....	57
Results.....	60
Research Question 1 .....	60
Research Question 2 .....	63
Research Question 3 .....	67
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	73
Credibility .....	73
Transferability.....	74

Dependability .....	74
Confirmability .....	74
Summary .....	75
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	77
Interpretation of the Findings .....	77
Findings in the Literature .....	77
Support of Findings in the Conceptual Framework .....	81
Limitations of the Study .....	82
Recommendations .....	82
Implications .....	83
Implications for Positive Social Change .....	83
Implications for Educational Practice .....	84
Conclusion .....	85
References .....	86
Appendix A: Participation Invitation Email .....	101
Appendix B: Interview Protocol .....	102
Appendix C: Themes by Research Questions .....	105

List of Tables

Table 1. Research Questions and Interview Questions Alignment..... 41

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Online learning is becoming popular among higher education students (Allen et al., 2016). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), 35% of postsecondary students enrolled in distance education courses in the fall of 2018. Online learning within the community college environment is growing; however, there is a lack of information regarding factors that contribute to student persistence in online courses at the community college level. As community colleges continue to add online courses to meet the educational needs of students, the focus must be placed on the success and effectiveness of online courses (Gregory & Lampley, 2016). According to Shea and Bidjerano (2019), students often struggle with various obstacles in the online learning environment that will impact their persistence in online learning courses. The current study focused on students' perceptions regarding external and internal factors of the online learning environment that support student persistence at the community college level. The location of this study was one Midwest community college in the United States. The results of this study may give community college administrators insight into the external and internal factors of online learning that can contribute to students' persistence, thereby promoting social change by providing information about changes that can increase student persistence in online learning.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the problem background, the purpose of the study, and the conceptual framework for this research. Additionally, the research questions (RQs) and the nature of this study are introduced. Chapter 1 also includes

definitions of important terms and discussion of assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance and ends with a summary of the critical points in the chapter.

### **Background**

Community colleges provide access to education for students who may not otherwise attend college. According to Kolbe and Baker (2019), community colleges are a point of entry for many students who never considered furthering their education or obtaining a college degree. Community colleges are also seen as a gateway to strengthening the workforce. They play a significant role in working with employers to ensure that current and future employees have the necessary skills needed in the job force (Kolbe & Baker, 2019). There are several advantages to attending a community college such as an open-door policy that makes it accessible for everyone, tuition costs that are less expensive than a 4-year university, and flexible program offerings (Grubbs, 2020). Along with the benefits of attending a community college, there are also challenges in the forefront. Grubbs (2020) identified on-time completion rates as the top challenge for community colleges, which may have an impact on student success in academic programs.

Community colleges are advancing when it comes to providing convenience and flexibility of learning. Despite the continuous growth of online course offerings at community colleges, student persistence rates are lower in the online versus traditional courses. According to Gregory and Lampley (2016), online learning at the community college level allows nontraditional students to take online courses, providing flexibility to balance other life responsibilities such as work and family. Additionally, Gregory and

Lampley noted that the number of postsecondary students enrolled in online classes is exceeding those enrolled in face-to-face instruction in their academic performance. With the growing number of students enrolling in online courses at community colleges, administrators need to understand how to define adult students' characteristics to meet their needs to become academically successful (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016). Online education is appealing for adults who may be balancing work, family, and other obligations (Allen et al., 2016). The current study was needed to understand, from the perception of students, the external and internal factors contributing to their persistence in online learning.

### **Problem Statement**

Since 2000, online learning has increased within the community college setting. In 2014, approximately 97% of all community colleges were offering some form of online courses (Allen & Seamen, 2015). The problem is that student persistence rates are lower in online courses than in traditional courses (Shea & Bidjerano, 2016). Due to the diverse population of students within the community college setting, it is unclear which external and internal factors have led to student persistence and which have been contributors to low persistence rates in online courses. James et al. (2016) found that first-year community college students who took all courses online were less likely to be retained or enroll in subsequent semesters. According to Travers (2016), student achievement in online courses at community colleges is comparable to traditional courses; however, online course persistence rates are significantly lower compared to their traditional classroom counterparts (Shea & Bidjerano, 2016). In 2017, City of Hope

Community College (CHCC; pseudonym), the focus of the current study, showed that 28% of the students had completed at least one online course while 11.17% of the students had completed all courses online.

According to research completed by Community College Research Center (2013), student online courses persistence rates were lower than those taking face-to-face courses. The Community College Research Center compared online and face-to-face persistence rates by conducting a study at community colleges in southern and western states. Their study revealed that 19% of the students withdrew from face-to-face and 32% percent withdrew from online in southern state colleges; in western state colleges, 10% of the students withdrew from face-to-face and 18% withdrew from online. In both groups of states, persistence rates for online courses were significantly lower than for face-to-face courses.

Quantitative data indicated that there are increasing numbers of students enrolling in online coursework at community colleges (Gregory & Lampley, 2016; Shea & Bidgerano, 2016); however, there is a gap in practice addressing student perceptions of the external and internal factors that influence their persistence in online learning courses. Understanding the underlying factors that contribute to student persistence in the online classroom will help administrators develop online programs, evaluation, and faculty instructional processes, and will improve student achievement (Gregory & Lampley, 2016); however, there is no empirical evidence as to the perceptions of the external/internal factors that contribute to student persistence. According to quantitative studies done by Gregory and Lampley (2016) and Shea and Bidgerano (2016),



performance and completion rates for students at the community college level who participated in online learning were lower than rates for students taking only in-person classroom instruction courses. Online learning within the community college setting provides students with an alternative way of achieving success. Still, many students who take online courses have characteristics that can place them at risk for academic failure (Gregory & Lampley, 2016). According to Gregory and Lampley, student success will depend on students' persistence and characteristics that may include the individual's age group, gender, or student academic classification.

Community colleges serve a diverse student body, including adult learners who have work experience and are returning to college to develop skills needed to advance in the workforce. Adult learners may encounter external and internal challenges to as barriers to online student persistence. External factors refer to those influences that cannot be controlled by the student and may impact their persistence decision. Internal factors refer to the elements that students bring with them that will have an impact on their persistence decision. According to De Paepe et al. (2018), external challenges that can serve as barriers for online learners may include work obligations, family commitments, and technical problems. Internal issues that serve as barriers for online learners may include the lack of interaction with teachers and peers, learning challenges, and technology challenges.

In a large population of nontraditional students in the community college setting, students should achieve success in online courses at equal rates to those taking face-to-face instruction. According to Allen and Seaman (2018), student enrollment in online

programs is increasing; however, the quality of online classes is questionable when looking at whether students are successful in taking online courses. Little is known about the success of students who enroll in online courses, as well as the history of online learning (Gering et al., 2018). There is much discrepancy in the literature when it comes to the relationship of online student enrollment and student success, so there is a need to further investigate (Sublett, 2019). According to Travers (2016), lawmakers are pushing for community colleges to improve student success; however, researchers have not addressed the factors that influence student persistence in the online learning environment. At CHCC, student persistence rates are lower in online courses than in traditional courses. The problem addressed in the current study was that although there is a body of research related to online persistence and success focusing on the use of quantitative methods, there is a lack of in-depth understanding of factors related to persistence and success in online courses using qualitative methods.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of the external and internal factors that contribute to their persistence in online courses at a Midwest community college in the United States. The research paradigm associated with perceptions is qualitative. The intent of this study was to describe the external and internal factors that contribute to students' persistence in the online learning environment. External factors refer to influences that cannot be controlled that may impact a student's persistence decision. External factors may include work obligations, family commitments, and technical problems. Internal factors refer to those factors that students

bring with them that will have an impact on their persistence decision. Internal factors may include the lack of interaction with teachers and peers, learning challenges, and technology challenges. The results of this study have the potential to inform administrators and faculty at CHCC to address issues with students' persistence in online learning courses, thereby improving overall student success.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions set the foundation for the type of data collected to address the problem (Newman & Covrig, 2013). The research questions identified for the current study were based on the components of Rovai's (2003) composite persistence model (CPM), which focused on student characteristics and student skills prior to taking online classes that would lead to internal factors before admission, as well as external factors after admission that could also impact internal factors that may affect a student's persistence decision. Through the transparency of the CPM, the research questions for this study addressed the contributing external and internal factors of student persistence in online learning within community colleges. I sought to answer the following research questions for this study:

RQ1: How do students perceive their individual characteristics (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender, academic performance, academic preparation) influence persistence in online courses?

RQ2: How do students perceive their skills (e.g., computer literacy, time management, reading and writing) influence persistence in online courses?

RQ3: How do students perceive external factors (e.g., family responsibilities, hours of employment, crisis) influence persistence in online courses?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Rovai's (2003) CPM served as the conceptual framework for this study. The CPM addresses characteristics affecting student persistence in online distance learning programs. The CPM was derived from Tinto's (1975) traditional student retention theory and Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition theory. Tinto's traditional student retention theory claims that a student's persistence and dropout can be determined by their academic and social integration at the institution. Bean and Metzner's nontraditional student attrition theory emphasized that nontraditional student persistence is impacted by environmental factors including family obligations and other external obligations. The CPM framework has been used in studies of online learning in higher education since its inception. Rovai's CPM provides details on student persistence in online courses based on characteristics and skills that may impact students before admission, along with external and internal factors that may affect students after admission. Rovai's model shows how student skills such as computer literacy, information literacy, time management, reading and writing, and computer-based interaction, along with student characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, intellectual development, academic performance, and academic preparation are internal factors that play a role once a student has started the program. Students in Rovai's model must also deal with added pressures of external commitments such as work schedule, family responsibilities, finances, and life events. Rovai's model shows that these factors work

together to influence a student's decision to persist or drop out. The subsequent research and application of Rovai's CPM have served as a guide to creating successful online learning programs, thereby improving student success in the online learning environment (Milman, 2016). Keeping the focus on students' perspectives of student persistence in online coursework should be consistent with Rovai's factors related to student persistence and attrition in online programs. The extensive use of the CPM in describing the characteristics, skills, external factors, and internal factors that affect student persistence in the online learning environment supported the research questions and guided the data collection and analysis for the current study.

### **Nature of the Study**

Burkholder et al. (2016) noted that qualitative research could be useful when focusing on uncovering meaning from the participants' perspective. Qualitative research also provides knowledge about the phenomenon that is not understood and has not been explored (Frey, 2018). The findings of the current may provide information that can inform practice, education, and outcomes. The five qualitative research designs commonly used in qualitative research are case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative (Burkholder et al., 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identified a sixth design labeled the basic research design, which has been used across disciplines and was the research design chosen for the current study. Basic qualitative research is conducted to understand how people interpret, conduct, and make meaning of things through their world and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the current study, I aimed to gain a more in-depth understanding from

students at one Midwest community college regarding factors that contribute to student persistence in online learning. This basic qualitative study involved conducting interviews with students to gain insight into their perceptions of the external and internal factors that contribute to student persistence in online learning coursework. I conducted interviews with eight students who were 18 and older, were not enrolled in dual or early middle college, and had completed a minimum of two online courses within past 2 years. I used open-ended interview questions to allow participants to describe their perceptions of the factors that contribute to their persistence in online education.

### **Definitions**

*Adult learners:* Nontraditional learners who are typically 24 years of age or older (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016).

*Blended learning:* A combination of online courses and face-to-face instruction (Allen et al., 2016).

*Characteristics:* Learning characteristics shown by students that contribute to being successful (Travers, 2016).

*External factors:* Factors outside of the institution that can pose a barrier to online learning (De Paepe et al., 2018).

*Internal factors:* Factors within the institution that can pose a barrier to online learning (De Paepe et al., 2018).

*Nontraditional students:* Students who are underrepresented, such as women, minorities, and older adults (Mohammadi et al., 2020).

*Online:* Courses and content delivered online typically without face-to-face contact (Allen et al., 2016).

*Persistence:* Behavior resulting in student success (Folk, 2019).

*Student success:* Achieving academic coursework goals and outcomes (Gering et al., 2018).

### **Assumptions**

According to Ravitch and Mittenfelner (2016), assumptions are a central aspect of qualitative research. The first assumption in the current study was that students who participated in the study understood the importance of student persistence in online learning. The second assumption was that students who participated in the study were truthful when responding to the interview questions. Because students were not benefiting from the study and were participating of their own free will, there was no reason for them to provide false information. The third assumption was that the findings of this study would not be generalizable to other institutions because this study was conducted at one Midwest community college. Even though the results cannot be generalized, they may be useful for future research and improving policy and practice.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This basic qualitative study was focused on one community college in a Midwest state. The community college is one of 33 colleges within the system. The study focused on students who were 18 and older, were not enrolled in dual or early middle college, and had completed a minimum of two online courses within the past 2 years. Students were selected through purposeful sampling strategies at one campus. Students from other

campuses in the system, students who were not 18 and older, students enrolled in dual or early middle college, and students who had not completed at least two online courses were excluded from the study.

### **Limitations**

There were two limitations in this study. The first limitation was that the study was conducted at one community college; therefore, the findings were not generalizable to other community colleges or universities who offer online courses. The second limitation was the use of only eight participants for this study.

### **Significance**

The findings of this study could provide administrators and faculty at CHCC with information regarding the external and internal factors that contribute to students' persistence in online courses at the community college level, thereby providing the college with the information needed to develop programs to assist students. Online persistence requires understanding the factors impacting student outcomes and strategies the community colleges are lacking when it comes to online coursework success (Wladis et al., 2017). Although quantitative studies had addressed the relationship between online instructors and online students' performance, qualitative data were needed to identify student perceptions regarding the factors of online learning that contribute to their persistence. Collecting qualitative data on external and internal factors that contribute to student persistence in online learning courses may allow the community college to support faculty and staff in developing online courses (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Thor & Moreau, 2016; Travers, 2016). The current study's findings might help college



administrators gain additional insights into the factors of online courses that contribute to students' persistence at one Midwest community college. Social change may be promoted by providing information to administrators at CHCC about changes that may lead to increased student persistence.

### **Summary**

Online learning in the community college setting is growing; however, there is a lack of information on factors that contribute to student persistence in online coursework. Understanding the factors that contribute to student persistence in online courses may provide administrators with the information needed to implement strategies to improve the success rate for students enrolled in community college online courses. Chapter 2 contains a literature review that focuses on the history of continuous growth, student demographics, online learning barriers, student retention, student persistence, student success, hybrid model, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem is that enrollment in online courses is increasing at the community college level; however, student persistence rates in online learning are lower than traditional courses. In this chapter, I provide a synthesis of the findings from studies that were relevant to student persistence in online learning. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore student perceptions of the external and internal factors that contribute to students' persistence in online courses at a Midwest community college. This chapter is organized in several sections. It begins with overviews of the literature search strategy and the conceptual foundation in which I explained Rovai's (2003) CPM, which constituted the conceptual framework for the study. I used the CPM to gain insight into the external and factors affecting online course persistence rates at a community college despite the increase of students' enrolling in online courses. In the literature review subsections that follow, I provide empirical context for this basic qualitative study, including a review of relevant literature on student demographics, online learning barriers, retention, persistence, student success, student characteristics, faculty support, impact of blended learning on student persistence, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings from the literature review supported the need for qualitative research on student perceptions of the factors that affect online learning persistence within the community college setting.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I completed the literature review using multiple research databases. I focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published within the past 5 years (2016–2021) that focused

on the problem of this study (e.g., persistence, retention, online learning, and online learning success). I excluded articles that were not related to student persistence and retention in online learning. The following databases were used: ERIC, Academic Search Premier, Education Source, SAGE, Taylor and Francis, and Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations. Goggle Scholar was another search engine that provided rich, full-text literature included in this review. I reviewed over 200 articles to determine whether they were relevant to my study. Some older articles were also included if they provided value to the study. Saturation was reached after using search terms and combination of terms to identify peer-reviewed articles published within the past 5 years. The terms used in the search for literature were *community college, higher education, online learning, distance learning, student success, academic achievement, blended learning, perceptions, characteristics, internal/external barriers, dropout, retention, persistence, and COVID-19*.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Rovai's (2003) CPM was the conceptual framework for this study. Rovai's model is composed of Tinto's (1975) theory on student retention and Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory on student attrition. The focus of Rovai's model is online learners and factors that may impact their decision to persist or drop out of an online course or to enroll in an online course. Rovai concentrated on factors affecting students' persistence in taking online courses before and after admission into the academic program. Factors of the CPM that influence a student's decision to persist in online courses before admissions include student characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, academic performance, etc.) and

student skills (time management, computer literacy, computer-based interaction, etc.).

Factors of the CPM that influence a student to persist in online courses after admissions consisted of internal (social integration, satisfaction, commitment, study habits, etc.) and external (finances, family responsibilities hours of employment, etc.) factors. Rovai's prior-to-admission and after-admission categories were also present in Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's models. Rovai addressed the impact that external factors had on shaping students' perceptions, reactions, and commitments, which was lacking in Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's models. These factors are important to the community college and online students (Rovai, 2003). In the current study, CPM provided a valuable framework for understanding factors that may impact persistence and academic success of students enrolled in online courses in the community college setting.

Rovai's (2003) CPM has been used by other researchers since its inception. Folk (2019) used CPM to study persistence and retention of first-year online learners. Youngju et al. (2013) examined the persistence and dropout of students enrolled in online classes. Park et al. (2011) used CPM as a framework to examine strategies to limit attrition of online students by encouraging persistence among students who were at risk for withdrawing. Perry et al. (2008) used CPM as a framework to determine the reasons for students withdrawing from an online nursing course. Perry et al. discovered that most of the students' reasons for withdrawal mapped the external factors of Rovai's model. In understanding the reasons behind the withdrawal rates, Perry et al. argued that the online learning experience could be altered.

## **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable**

### **Community Colleges**

Grubbs (2020) described community colleges as 2-year institutions of the U.S. higher education system that provide opportunities for individuals who may not have considered attending college. A key component in promoting higher education in the United States has been community colleges. The overarching mission of the community college is to provide students with a low-cost high-quality education, to prepare students to transfer to a 4-year institution, or to train students to enter the workforce. Originally, community colleges were trade or preparatory schools, an alternative to secondary education dating as far back as the early 1900s (Grubbs, 2020). Grubbs mentioned that during the earlier years, lawmakers saw community colleges as a way of improving the community and providing learning opportunities for local students. Today, community colleges are putting more emphasis on access and opportunity for all.

Community colleges also provide critical job training for students who are currently in the workforce, helping them to refine their employment skills and expand their skills for future growth (Grover & Miller, 2018). According to Kolbe and Baker (2019), community colleges have been called upon by leaders in the community to develop training programs that will lead to improving the workforce. As technology advances, so does the need for skilled workers. It is essential that community colleges and universities support students pursuing their goals by offering multiple ways of simplifying their degree pathway. As the economy pushes more toward technology and

innovation, many jobs created will require at least some postsecondary education (Swanger, 2016).

### **Community College Governance and Accreditation**

Community colleges are an essential component in higher education. Community colleges serve their communities by providing affordable educational opportunities for all individuals, preparing students to continue their education at a 4-year institution or enter the workforce. Most community colleges are governed by a board of trustees composed of qualified stakeholders who oversee the operations. The election of trustees is governed by state laws either through election or appointment (The Association of Community College Trustees, n.d.). The responsibility of the board of trustees is to meet the needs of the community while also upholding the college's values and fulfilling the college's mission (The Association of Community College Trustees, n.d.). Other responsibilities include ensuring there is consistency in the mission and goals throughout the college and that effective leadership and resources are utilized responsibly.

The American Association of Community Colleges (n.d.) is the organization that advocates for all colleges in the United States, representing over 1,000 2-year degree institutions and over 12 million students. The organization has existed since 1920 and has acted as the spokesperson on behalf of community colleges (Grubbs, 2020). The American Association of Community Colleges strives to be the voice for community college missions and is committed to the community college movement. The American Association of Community Colleges is committed to making sure that community colleges are recognized as being the gateway to the American dream.

Accreditation is an important element for community colleges because it ensures the integrity of the program offered at the institution along with financial aid awards, which include student loans and federally funded grant awards (Cumming & Miller, 2019). The seven accreditation regions in the United States include New England, Middle States, North Central, Southern, Western, and Northwest (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, n.d.). The recognized accrediting organization based on regions are Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Higher Learning Commission, Middle States Commission on Higher Education, New England Commission of Higher Education, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, and WASC Senior College and University Commission. Accreditation for community colleges in the state of Michigan is based on standards implemented by the HLC. The criteria are based on the institution's mission, integrity (ethical and responsible conduct), teaching and learning (quality, resources, and support), teaching and learning (evaluation and improvement), institutional effectiveness, resources, and planning (HLC, 2020). Institutions receive approval from the HLC prior to implementing new degree and certificate programs, offering online education courses, adding a program certification or specialization, or making any changes to academic programs. Institutions of higher education are accredited either regionally or nationally. Regional accreditation focuses on granting accreditation to colleges and universities, while national accreditation focuses on technical and trade institutions or religious

institutions. Regional accreditation validates the courses being offered at the institution, governance and administration, finances, resources, and adherence to the mission.

### **Growth of Online Learning in Higher Education**

More than 60% of higher education institutions include online learning as part of their long-term strategies (Gering et al., 2018). According to Montelongo (2019), many students are experiencing online education through hybrid courses, fully online courses, or a combination of in-person instruction and online learning as a pathway to degree completion. Online learning gives students the opportunity to complete a certification or degree, gain additional skills, and acquire training opportunities that could result in the improvement of the economy (Meade, 2019). For students to succeed in online learning, distinct models of persistence are needed to describe how success can be achieved. Nontraditional students typically struggle with online learning due to limited in-person contact and socializing with faculty and peers (Nadasen & List, 2016). Nadasen and List (2016) also mentioned that online learners may further be hampered by the institution's limited physical infrastructure and facilities.

### **Growth of Online Learning in Community Colleges**

Online learning within the community college setting is growing. According to Allen et al. (2016), public community colleges enroll more students in strictly online courses than any other higher education institutions. According to Kolski and Weible (2019), online enrollment in community colleges is rising every year. Some studies showed that students were hampered by online learning, and others showed that students enjoyed having the option of taking online courses (Sublett, 2019). Online learning has



emerged as a common form of course delivery at many higher education institutions (Duesbery et al., 2019; Montelongo, 2019). According to Allen and Seaman (2018), the number of students enrolled in online coursework has increased for the 14th straight year, particularly for students enrolled in a community college setting. In 2016, there were 5.9 million students enrolled in community colleges, and 30% of those students had taken at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2018). Ortagus (2017) reported that from 2000 to 2012, those enrolled in online courses increased from 5.9% to 32.1%. Community colleges are seeing growth in students registering for online courses due to the offered classes and the cost of tuition (Mitchell, 2017). Because more community college students participate in online courses, it is evident that community colleges are meeting student demands for online course offerings (Huston & Minton, 2016). Online learning will continue to play an essential role within the community college setting (Horvitz et al., 2019).

### **Community College Student Demographics**

Online learning continues to rise, providing students with additional access to learning outside of a traditional classroom. More students, specifically at community colleges, engage in online learning. Community colleges enroll nontraditional adult learners who are over the age of 24 years, work at least a part-time job, and juggle complex life roles, as well as younger traditional students coming directly out of high school (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016). According to Shea and Bidjerano (2019), the demographics of a community college student can pose challenges in completing courses and being successful in the online learning environment. Statistics as of 2020 showed the

racess of those enrolled in community colleges throughout the United States were 26% Hispanic, 13% African American, 45% White, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% Native American (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020).

Community college demographics are different than those of 4-year institutions. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2020), 29% of the students are the first generation to attend college, the average age of students is 28, the median age of students is 24, 9% of students are over the age of 40, 15% are single parents, 20% are students with disabilities, 57% are women, 43% are men, 67% attend full-time, and 64% attend part-time. Researchers have shown that a student's demographic characteristics play a major role in their online learning performance (Rizvi et al., 2019). Rizvi et al. (2019) mentioned that demographics characteristics can consist of an individual's socioeconomic standing, education level, age, gender, and disability status. Many researchers argued that women are more motivated when it comes to online learning than their male counterparts (Volchok, 2019). Volchok (2019) studied 237 men and 198 women taking partial online marketing courses at an urban community college. The study's results revealed that, on average, the women students outperformed the men students. It was also shown that women were more self-regulated learners.

### **Online Learning Barriers**

Even though online learning options are increasing within the community college environment, students are faced with barriers that can prevent them from succeeding in online coursework (De Paepe et al., 2018). Barriers may consist of internal or external factors. Internal barriers in online learning are obstacles within the institution that may

directly impact whether students are successful with online coursework. In online instruction, students face challenges with learning technology and learning independently without face-to-face interaction with faculty or peers (De Paepe et al., 2018).

External barriers in online learning are those obstacles outside the institution that may directly impact whether students are successful with online coursework. External barriers faced by students may consist of work and family obligations and technology issues, which may include internet connectivity (De Paepe et al., 2018). Many students enjoy the convenience and flexibility of taking online courses, but some students do not do well in online classes. According to Gregory and Lampley (2016), online learning allows adult learners the ability to learn remotely while still being able to fulfill outside commitments; however, the structure of online learning can cause barriers when it comes to student success.

Online learners are often faced with the barriers of participation whether it be doing work independently or as a group, creating a feeling of isolation. According to Gillette-Swan (2017) some of the issues that students may experience is feeling anxiety over the use of technology, feeling uncomfortable with group assignments, and there may be a level of difficulty working with peers on group presentations. Social interaction among instructors and students is a key factor in online education (Damary et al., 2017). Effective social interaction can lead to enjoying online learning experiences, effective online learning, and the possibility of taking additional online courses. Personal factors that can affect a student's ability to succeed in online courses is having to care for young children or work commitments. Even though online learning may provide students with

an alternative way of learning, additional issues may arise through distractions that may prevent the student from participating in live activities, or scheduled contact times established (Gillette-Swan, 2017).

Online learning can also cause challenges for students with disabilities. Some students with disabilities may require additional support in the online learning environment. McManus et al. (2017) did a study to understand the barriers that students with a mental health disability were experiencing with online learning. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 students, and the results showed that the major learning barriers were the impact of their disability, personal circumstances, and the learning environment. This gave insight as to why enrollment was lower among students with disability and provided awareness of those barriers that needed to be addressed. Henderikx et al. (2018) did a study looking at whether age, gender, educational level, and online learning experience had any effect on barriers while studying online. Henderikx et al. revealed that it was difficult for students to combine work and family life with online learning, especially for younger and middle-aged adults. Henderikx et al. found that the more experienced individuals are with taking online courses, the lower the challenges will become, and those with a lower educational level may have trouble with the online learning content.

### **Student Retention in Online Learning**

One area of concern for institutions that are offering online learning is student retention. James et al. (2016) studied community college students taking online courses, collecting student information from the Predictive Analytics Reporting (PAR)

Framework. The PAR Framework is a non-profit organization that provides institutions the tools and resources to take data and seek patterns of student risk and success. James et al., (2016) study results revealed from that community college students who participate in the PAR Framework did not result in lower retention rates. Older students taking online courses were retained at a much higher rate than those who were younger. There are mixed reviews when it comes to retention rates of online learners; however, many institutional leader's express concerns over poor retention rates of those students taking online courses (Gering et al., 2018). Travers (2016) suggested that online student achievement within community college is impacted due to the large population of nontraditional students. Implementing both support systems for both faculty and students can potentially improve retention rates in online courses.

Kolbrun (2018) reported that retention rates varied depending on the delivery mode of online learning and that retention was most effective with blended learning modes. Overall, the retention rates of those taking 100% online courses were lower than those in the hybrid model. Shaw et al. (2016) revealed just the opposite with other studies showing that students' life factors, learning styles, personal attributes, or technology did not affect student retention or withdrawal rates. Some of the most influential theories and theoretical models that deal with student retention are Tinto (1975) integrative model, Bean-Metzner's (1985) student attrition model, and Rovai (2003) CPM. Community colleges are faced with identifying students who may potentially drop out of online coursework and identify factors that may impact whether they take some online courses.

### **Student Persistence in Online Courses**

Persistence enhances a student's ability to be able to complete an online course. Online programs are consistently reporting higher student attrition rates, requiring a need to understand the causes and remedies that are associated with attrition rates in online learning (Jain & Waugh, 2018). According to Brubacher and Silinda (2019), academic persistence is a psychological factor. Brubacher and Silinda identified student competencies, and motivation as predictors for students' academic persistence. Brubacher and Silinda found that a student's motivation and not competencies had a significant impact on student persistence. Knowing the motivation of online learners and the factors that impact them, increase the chances of student persistence in online courses. According to Simplicio (2019), making sure that students are ready for online classes, selecting the right faculty, initial classroom assignments, scheduled contact times, and having a strong campus support system are strategies to help maintain persistence rates. Student engagements have an impact on student success, persistence, and student learning, Blakely and Major (2019) interviewed 40 students to provide their perceptions on student engagement within the online learning environment. The themes uncovered in the study were behavioral, cognitive, social, emotional, and agentic engagement. Blakely and Major revealed that for student engagement to be achieved, communication is essential. Student persistence results to student success in completing online courses.

### **Community College Online Learning Student Success**

There has been a shift of interest at the community college level on the push for student success from policymakers (McComb & Lyddon, 2016; Travers, 2016). McComb

and Lyddon (2016) believe that some community colleges place more focus on inputs and outputs as opposed to outcomes. Those institutions who do engage in student success efforts are doing so to produce positive student outcomes. According to Carales et al. (2016), community colleges must look at various approaches, practices, and strategies to best serve their students and find ways to increase educational attainment and student success. Given the diversity of students in higher education, flexible teaching methods are crucial to improving student success (Wynants & Dennis, 2018). According to Morales (2019), to ensure that students taking online courses achieve success, a balance is needed between the high-tech nature of online learning along and high-touch approach characteristics of the best institutions. Morales further emphasized that increasing student success in the online learning environment will take dedicated support services, academic, and student development.

Bourdeaux and Shoenack (2016) studied what students expected from their instructors in the online learning environment to be successful. Bourdeaux and Shoenack revealed that students expect clarity and respect when it comes to online learning. Even though community colleges offer more online courses, many feel as though online learners are not as successful as those in the traditional classroom. According to Rovai (2003), success in online classes takes discipline and self-direction. American Association of Community Colleges (2019) reported that one of the challenges to success cited by community college students was online classes. There are mixed reviews about whether students are more successful in online learning than attending the traditional classroom setting. Mollenkoph et al. (2017) study revealed no difference in students'

learning outcomes when it comes to online or face-to-face instruction. According to Huntington-Klein et al. (2017) and Olson and Johnson (2015), students are less likely to obtain a degree if they take online classes instead of the traditional class setting.

With the expansion of online learning in the community college setting, there is much concern regarding student outcomes. Shea and Bidjerano (2016) explored outcomes of the community college student who have or have not taken online courses. Shea and Bidjerano concluded that community college students who had taken online classes had a higher 6-year degree completion rate. There was little difference in the dropout rate compared to those who have not taken any online courses. Shea and Bidjerano (2019) further investigated whether online course loads influence student success. Shea and Bidjerano revealed that online course loads are related to the probability of transfers, completion, and dropout rates and are a direct predictor to student success. Colleges across the United States are being challenged to develop innovative ways to improve student learning and achievement (Hizer et al., 2017). Student orientation, faculty support, student characteristics, and blended learning (hybrid model) can impact student success in the online learning environment.

### **Online Learning Orientation**

Students enrolled in the online learning environment need additional support in helping them achieve academic success. Thor and Moreau (2016) provided insight into the California Community College System's Online Education Initiative to improve student success in online learning courses. This initiative's objective was to provide instructional and support services to increase student completion and transfer rates. The



initiative also provided online tutoring, online course support, and professional development for faculty. The mission of the initiative was to make sure students enrolled in the California Community College system obtain an associate degree and transfer to a 4-year institution by offering online courses to help students achieve their academic goals. The online education initiative efforts have the potential to bring online student success rates equivalent to those taking traditional classes.

According to Yeh et al. (2019), in making sure that students are successful in online learning, institutions must look at students' online learning readiness and motivational factors to remain focused. Orientation provides academic and technical support needed for students to be successful in their online coursework (Stoebe, 2020). Online learning readiness is closely related to the success of learning in the online environment (Liu, 2019). Chan (2017) randomly selected 100 community colleges to look at their orientation programs for online learning. Chan revealed that institutions are offering orientation programs, and they realize the urgency of using technology to impact operations and new student orientations. According to Arhin and Wang'eri (2018), orientation programs can significantly improve the overall success, retention, and completion rates in online learning. Student retention was evaluated in this study by using a correlation research design (quantitative) to verify any relationships among variables to predict group membership. Arhin and Wang'eri study showed that participants had a positive perception about orientation programs. Providing students with online orientation can be an effective strategy to easing them into online learning (Abdous, 2019).

### **Evaluation of Online Programs**

For students to be persistent in online learning, institutions need to establish mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of their online programs. Richardson et al. (2020) discussed that systematic evaluation of online programs help with continuous quality improvement of programs, identifying which components of a program should be maintained, changed, or omitted. Without a program evaluation, there is no understanding of what is working and what is not.

### **Online Learning Faculty Support**

For faculty to promote student persistence in online learning, they will need the support of the institution. According to Travers (2016), institutions need to create strategies to support faculty in the online learning environment. Identifying a student's academic goals, interests, and technology capabilities can assist faculty when planning coursework. Lowenthal (2019) did a study looking at how institutions prepare faculty members who are teaching online courses. In determining how institutions train and support faculty to teach online, surveys were completed by personnel at 16 institutions. Lowenthal survey revealed that 10 out of the 16 institutions surveyed required faculty to take part in some form of training prior to teaching online. According to Golden (2016), supporting online instructors is an issue with the growing number of online classes being offered. When it comes to faculty support, Kibaru (2018) revealed that to help their online students become successful in online coursework, the institution must have improved, updated, and maintenance when it comes to technology and administrative support to help overcome any issues.

According to Wynants and Dennis (2018), with the struggling needs of diverse students and faculty keeping up with new instructional practices, professional development opportunities are needed for both full-time and part-time faculty members. Professional development training for faculty will help increase the quality and quantity of online and blended course offerings (Richardson et al., 2020).

### **Online Student Characteristics**

A student's characteristics will play a significant role in being successful in the online learning environment (Travers, 2016). According to Wladis (2017), performance and persistence in online learning can be affected depending on a student's characteristics. Wladis' focus was placed on the effects of instructor-level and student characteristics in measuring relationships between course characteristics with successful completion of online and face-to-face-classes. Data was collected from 2330 online students and face-to-face from a large urban community college in the Northwest who took online or face-to-face courses during a specific timeframe. Wladis revealed that student characteristics do provide some variability in course outcomes; however, it depends on the course taken, such as elective courses versus core courses.

Joosten and Cusatis (2019) conducted a study at both a 2 and 4-year institution to determine the relationship that institutional characteristics such as course design, learner support, and assessment have on student outcomes and underrepresented students (e.g., low income, minority, first-generation, and impaired or disabled students). Joosten and Cusatis looked at those components that could positively influence student success in the online learning environment. Quantitative data showed that institutional characteristics

positively predicted student outcomes, performance, learning, and satisfaction. Favorable results were also demonstrated among underrepresented students. Research has also shown that the engagement in online education can impact a student's academic success. Soffer and Cohen (2019) looked at how student engagement affects those who complete or did not complete an online course. Soffer and Cohen discovered that there was a significant difference between those who completed online coursework and those who did not. Students enrolled in online coursework must be able to work independently to juggle schedules and meet deadlines, have excellent time management skills, prioritize, and commit (Soffer & Cohen, 2019). Ortagus (2017) research provided evidence showing that post-secondary students who were employed full-time, married, with children, or veterans represented a lower proportion of those enrolled in online courses than those outside of this population. Individuals who work full-time jobs, married, and have children are more likely than their peers to enroll in some online classes (Ortagus, 2017). According to Travers (2016), students within the community college setting face more time commitments than those in the typical post-secondary sectors.

A student's GPA before taking online coursework can serve also as an indicator of student persistence and completing online coursework. According to Babcock and Hussey (2019), when empowering students to succeed, it is essential to look at the student population. Wladis et al. (2016) studied students' characteristics and the online environment in predicting student outcomes. Wladis suggested that online courses are less likely to lead to lower rates in persistence; however, some characteristics guide students to enroll in online classes and dropout.

### **Faculty Employment Status and Workload**

Sufficient staffing is needed to promote student success in online courses.

According to Salley and Shaw (2015), online instructors often have many responsibilities and are unable to provide students' needed feedback to promote student success. Salley and Shaw looked at potential relationships between the online instructor's workload, employment status, and student performances. Salley and Shaw revealed no significant correlation between the instructor's employment status (full-time or part-time) and student performances; however, there was a negative correlation between the online instructor's workload and student performances. This outcome showed that in making sure that students achieve academic success in online learning, institutions must be mindful of faculty teaching overloads. Kibaru (2018) looked at some of the challenges that faculty inherit while teaching online. Many faculty members mentioned that teaching online is time-intensive, especially when there is a high number of students to attend to in the online course.

### **Impact of Blended Learning on Student Persistence**

Blended learning gives students a mixture of taking a combination of online and traditional face-to-face courses. Many researchers suggested that students are more successful in a blended learning environment, giving them the opportunity to take some classes online and some classes in a face-to-face format (Futch et al., 2016; Horvitz et al., 2019). According to Snart (2017), blended learning gives students flexibility and convenience and is best suited for 2-year institutions. Underrepresented students can be supported through face-to-face instruction while also balancing life activities and

participating in the hybrid format of learning. Blended courses can be effective and support student success if they are designed delivered appropriately (Futch et al., 2016). Community colleges are moving more in the direction of blended or hybrid learning. Horvitz et al. (2019) conducted a study on various instructional approaches for an online technical course. The different instructional strategies included pre-recorded videos, equipment at home, and in the lab, live video, stimulation, and professional site. Horvitz et al. revealed that most of the technical programs used online/face-to-face hybrid formats while also using asynchronous interactions in their courses, which is beneficial for instructors and students. The use of a variety of instructional methods helps in developing students' professional skills.

Kozakowski (2019) examined the emporium model of blended learning, that consisted of online learning in a lab setting. Kozakowski revealed that students using the emporium model were significantly less likely to pass a remedial course. Also, blended learning approaches may not be as effective for students who are not prepared academically for college. Ryan et al. (2016) also examined the effectiveness of blended learning among community college students. Ryan et al. discovered that students in community college using the mixed format experiences were similar, and the learning ability was more significant relative to those receiving face-to-face instruction. According to Hart and Park (2019) nontraditional community, college students can achieve academic goals by using blended learning if they receive motivational support to help them become successful. Hybrid/blended learning option will allow higher

education institutions to develop independent learners and give faculty the ability to become more innovative in promoting student success (Thomson, 2018).

The success of a blended learning depends on the course. Edwards and Faraji (2019) studied students' taking a hybrid General Biology course at Bronx Community College, a Hispanic serving community college. Edwards and Faraji revealed that students taking the hybrid course scored lower grades on final exam assessments and had lower passing grades than students who were in the face-to-face lecture sections of the course. Tratnik et al. (2019) looked at student satisfaction in taking online Business English courses. Tratnik results were consistent with previous research showing that students were more satisfied with taking this course in a face-to-face format as opposed to entirely online.

### **Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Online Learning**

In March 2019, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a world pandemic, forever changing the face of online learning in higher education (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Every educational institution in the United States were forced to transition quickly from face-to-face instruction to online instruction. All instructors, regardless of experience, were pivoted to online learning. Johnson et al. (2020) completed a study with 897 faculty members at 672 institutions in the U.S., transitioning to emergency teaching and learning approaches that were hard for many to adapt. The study included 47% from four-year public institutions, 36% from four-year private institutions, and 17% were from two-year institutions. Since many instructors and students were not familiar with the online format, changes were made to assignments, and the pass/fail model. Johnson et al.

revealed faculty concerns, which included student support, access to digital materials, and the guidance and tools for being able to work from home.

There is no way to predict how long the coronavirus will impact the United States, so online learning is quickly becoming a part of the new way of education. In making sure that institutions are providing effective online teaching and that every student is academically successful, there should be strategies to ensure equity, clearly communicating, and providing student-centered learning and support (Morgan, 2020). Online learning offers a range of opportunities and potential threats; however, the COVID-19 pandemic caused educational institutions to provide a chance for change (Rospigliosi, 2020). According to Oskoz and Smith (2020), even though faculty and students have shifted from the traditional classroom setting to online learning techniques, many are still adjusting to the new way of learning. Teachers have discovered the various learning environments, including face-to-face vs. online, synchronous vs. asynchronous, individual vs. collaborative, and autonomous vs. guided learning (Oskoz & Smith, 2020). Now is a good time for faculty and students to learn new skills and or upgrade existing skills.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In the literature review, I reviewed the history of continuous growth of online learning, student demographics, online learning barriers, student retention, student success including orientation, evaluation, faculty support, student characteristics, faculty employment status and workload, blended model, and COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review covered provides the foundation for this basic qualitative study.



Whereas this literature review highlights research and the success of online learning in the community college environment, it also suggests a gap in practice in terms of student perceptions on factors that influence their persistence in the online learning platform at the community college level. This basic qualitative study may shed some insight into the success of online coursework at the community college level and understand from student perceptions of those barriers that may prevent them from persisting.

Community colleges have been called upon to increase completion rates and improve student success. Completion and success rates can be accomplished by allowing students to use whatever form of learning works best for them. As the demand for online education continues to grow, community colleges will need to provide students with the flexibility of learning without sacrificing completion rates or instruction. By understanding the factors that contribute to online student persistence in the online environment at the community college level, students have a better chance of succeeding when taking online courses. Chapter 3 contains the research design with a focus on data collection and analysis.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

In this chapter, I discuss the research design and rationale; the role of the researcher; methodology, which includes the targeted population and approximate size; participant selection; instrumentation; procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; data analysis plan; issues with trustworthiness; and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3 concludes with a summary of the critical points in the chapter.

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

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of the external and internal factors that contribute to their persistence in online courses at a Midwest community college in the United States. The following research questions for this study were designed to understand better the contributing external and internal factors of student persistence in online courses:

RQ1: How do students perceive their individual characteristics (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender, academic performance, academic preparation) influence persistence in online courses?

RQ2: How do students perceive their skills (e.g., computer literacy, time management, reading and writing) influence persistence in online courses?

RQ3: How do students perceive external factors (e.g., family responsibilities, hours of employment, crisis) influence persistence in online courses?

To collect data that were pertinent to my research questions, I chose a qualitative approach to learn from the experiences of those who had engaged in online learning. Qualitative research is commonly used in education studies because it allows for the

collection of detailed information based on participants' experiences (Wladis et al., 2016). Quantitative researchers focus on numeric values and statistical analysis, whereas qualitative researchers focus on participants' experiences of the phenomenon being studied. Qualitative research provides a greater understanding of a situation by uncovering meaning from the participants' perspective (Burkholder et al., 2016).

The selected research design was a basic qualitative study. A basic qualitative design was selected to explore students' perceptions at one community college regarding factors that contribute to their persistence in online learning courses. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identified a basic qualitative design as a method used to explore individuals' interpretations of their experiences. Merriam and Tisdell noted that a researcher conducting a basic study should be interested in how people interpret their experiences, how people construct their worlds, and how people attribute meaning to their experiences. The goal of a basic qualitative study is to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. A basic qualitative design was the most logical choice for the current study because I targeted a specific group of participants.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as the researcher for this study was not only to access the thoughts and feelings of the participants in the study, but also to safeguard the participants and their data. I am a full-time administrative staff member at a large Midwest community college; however, I was not affiliated with the study site. I had no direct or indirect authority at the study site, and I did not serve on any committees, councils, or boards. My position at

my institution likely did not affect the responses of any students taking part in this study because I avoided potential conflict of interest or researcher bias.

## **Methodology**

In the methodology section, I describe the participant selection for the study, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation, data collection, and the data analysis plan.

### **Participant Selection**

Participants were selected from one community college that has a student population of 11,771 and comprises 37% full-time and 63% part-time students. Purposeful sampling was used in selecting participants who met the criteria for this study. Purposeful sampling allows for recruitment of participants who can provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon being investigated (Burkholder et al., 2016). In conducting this qualitative research, I had to make sure that the participants had experience with the phenomenon that was being studied (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). The criteria for participant selection for this study were students who were 18 and older, were not enrolled in dual or early middle college, and had completed a minimum of two online courses within the past 2 years. The sample size was eight students within the range recommended by Crouch and McKenzie (2016). Students were identified by Institutional Review Board (IRB) staff at CHCC. IRB staff provided a contact list of participants who met the criteria. From the list provided, I sent an email consisting of the invitation and informed consent form asking for volunteers to participate in the study.

## Instrumentation

Semistructured interviews with students were the primary source of data collection. Open-ended interview questions were used along with associated probing questions to clarify responses or allow participants to expand on their answers. The instrument was the protocol interview, which guided the interviewing process (see Appendix B). The interview protocol was used as a blueprint for the data collection. The interview questions were created based on the conceptual framework of the study, Rovai's (2003) CPM, which provided student characteristics, student skills, and external factors that influence students' persistence in online courses (see Table 1). To ensure the validity of the interview questions, I asked IRB staff and the dean of online learning at CHCC, along with an expert reviewer who holds a doctorate in education, to review the questions.

**Table 1**

*Research Questions and Interview Questions Alignment*

Interview question	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
IQ1	X		
IQ2	X		
IQ3	X		
IQ4	X		
IQ5		X	
IQ6		X	
IQ7		X	
IQ8		X	
IQ9		X	
IQ10			X
IQ11			X
IQ12			X
IQ13			X
IQ14			X
IQ15			X

## **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Prior to identifying and recruiting participants for the study, I obtained IRB approval. I met research standards at CHCC by completing all necessary paperwork and supplying them with the necessary documentation for the study. IRB approval was also obtained from Walden University. Walden's University's IRB approval number for this study was 04-05-21-0018303. Once IRB approval was obtained from both institutions, CHCC provided a password-protected contact list with the names and email addresses of those students who met the study criteria. I began the recruiting process by sending out an invitation to participate (see Appendix A) along with the informed consent form asking for volunteer participation in the study. The introductory email explained the purpose of the study, the timeframe for the study, and receipt of a \$10 gift card for their participation in the study (see Appendix A). The participant invitation and informed consent form were combined into one document as approved by Walden IRB. Students who agreed to participate in the study were asked to respond to the email with the words "I consent," which indicated their consent to be involved in the research and their understanding of the potential risks and benefits associated with the study. The informed consent form also informed participants that their participation was voluntary, and they could stop the interview at any time or decline to answer a particular question.

To ensure participants' flexibility and comfort, I conducted one individual interview with each participant virtually for about 45 minutes. Privacy was ensured by conducting interviews in a secured area, and I eliminated any noise or disturbance during the video interview. Prior to the start of the interview, I reminded participants that they

were able to stop the interview at any time or decline to answer a particular question, and I obtained permission to record the interview. Recording the session enabled me to ensure the accuracy of data collected during the interview. Interviews took place via Zoom and were recorded using the application's built-in recording option. Upon completion of the interview, I informed participants that follow-up questions may be necessary. Also, each participant received a copy of their interview transcript via email to validate for accuracy.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I prepared a verbatim transcript of the interview (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). After reviewing and obtaining approval of the accuracy of the transcripts from those who participated, I conducted an inductive coding process to identify themes by looking for repetitive or consistent patterns in the data. Coding is a way of analyzing qualitative data to help researchers identify patterns with multiple data points (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016; Saldana, 2016). For the current study, open coding was employed. Open coding allows researchers to read through the data to create labels, also called codes, for chunks of data that summarize what is seen happening (Saldana, 2016). I assigned codes, searched for patterns or themes in the identified codes, reviewed the codes, and synthesized the trends in themes (see Saldana, 2016). Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (<https://provalisresearch.com/products/qda-miner-qualitative-data-analysis-software/>) was used to assist with organizing and analyzing the data. This software provided the tool needed to interpret the data collected once data had been analyzed (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016).

To assist with the data analysis, I maintained a journal and wrote memos for reviewing the data. Data collection memos were also a part of the research process (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). Data collection memos allowed me to focus on emerging themes in the data. Discrepant cases could have created a problem within the data analysis; however, there were no discrepant cases identified in this study. To ensure adequate research data, I asked the study site institution to identify potential participants who were at least 18 years old, were not enrolled in dual or early college courses, and had completed at least two online courses.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a critical component of the qualitative research process. The researcher should be confident that the information gathered from sources used and methods utilized is accurate. In the current study, trustworthiness was established through ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Credibility**

Credibility was established by linking the study findings with reality in demonstrating the accuracy of the study findings. To ensure credibility for this study, I used an electronic recording device and conducted participant transcript review (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). The interview questions were reviewed prior to the interview process by the IRB staff and the dean of online learning at CHCC, along with an expert reviewer who holds a doctorate in education. Data collected during each interview went through participant validation, which allowed each participant to validate the data from their interview to ensure accuracy and resonance with their experiences



(see Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). Audio recording and transcripts helped eliminate any bias from the interview or misinterpretation of participants' responses to the interview questions. My expert reviewer also reviewed the data analysis to check for accuracy and bias of the information provided.

### **Transferability**

My role was not to prove that the research findings apply to student persistence but to provide evidence that can be used to guide future research. Transferability was established by providing evidence from my research findings that may be applicable to other contexts, situations, times, and populations (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016).

### **Dependability**

Dependability was established by making sure that the research findings were consistent and replicable. As the researcher, I verified that the study findings followed the raw data collected during the interviews. If another researcher examines the data, they should arrive at similar findings, interpretations, and conclusions.

### **Confirmability**

An audit trail was kept that provided the rationale for all data analysis decisions. Providing documentation of the information collected for the study, including the analyzed data, allowed for confirmability. The goal of confirmability is to explore how an individual's bias and prejudice can impact the interpretation of data (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). The findings from the current study were based on the participants' narratives with no researcher biases.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Ethics in qualitative research requires that the researcher understands, considers, and approach issues within the study (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). CHCC was informed of how the data would be used and stored, and those who would have access to the data. Informing participants typically comes in different forms. Informed consent involves explaining the research goals, the nature of the research, and the benefits and risks involved (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Each participant in the current study was informed of the study's purpose, selection protocol, how their identity would be protected, and the amount of time needed to complete the interview. Participants were sent an informed consent form combined with the participant invitation to complete and sign electronically, thereby agreeing to their participation in the study with the understanding that they could stop the interview at any time. To protect the identities of those participating and the research site, I used pseudonyms during the interviews and data analysis.

Data were collected for this study and stored on a password-protected computer. Hard copies of the data analysis are housed in a locked water/fireproof file cabinet at my home office. A password encryption backup flash drive was also used and updated at the same time information was stored on the computer to ensure there were no mishaps, or information become corrupted or lost. The backup flash drive contains all information pertinent to this study, including the interview transcripts, recordings, and informed consent. Besides me as the researcher, the dissertation committee are the only individuals who have access to the data. After 5 years, all paper records will be shredded and

recycled, records stored on my computer hard drive will be erased and information stored on flash drives or recorded will be destroyed. A record will be kept stating what records were destroyed, when, and how I did so.

Participants were offered an incentive to participate as compensation for their time. Using incentives in participant recruitment has shown to have quicker response times, and increases engagement (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). If a participant started the interview process and decided to stop before the interview was completed, they still received the incentive. No participant was penalized for not answering all the interview questions or deciding to stop the interview early.

Before any steps began with this study, approval was received from Walden's IRB (04-05-21-0018303) to carry out the study. A copy of the IRB approval was provided to Human Subject IRB at CHCC, a community college in a Midwest state.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 contains an explanation of my rationale in selecting a basic qualitative study to explore students' perceptions on the external and internal factors that contribute to their persistence in online courses at a Midwest community college in the United States. Participants' experiences were used to gain a deeper understanding of student persistence in online courses in the community college setting. Using semistructured interviews to explore student persistence in online learning, acquired rich, thick descriptions from participants. I was responsible for the analysis and interpretation of the data, using subjective judgement, and incorporating participants' realities. This chapter focused on the methodology of the study, the participation selection, and my role as the

researcher. Additionally, key measures to ensure the trustworthiness of this study were addressed, along with ethical considerations to provide ethical protection for both the participants and the data. Chapter 4 contains the analysis and findings from this current study.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore students' perceptions of the external and internal factors that contribute to their persistence at a Midwest community college in the United States. This chapter explains the research process used to interview eight participants. The thematic results from the eight interviews are also reported. The chapter includes six main sections: setting, data collection, data analysis, results, and evidence of trustworthiness. The research questions that guided this study addressed students' perceptions of how their individual characteristics, skills, and external factors influenced their persistence in online courses.

### **Setting**

The sampling criteria for participant selection in this study included 18 and older, not enrolled in dual or early middle college, and completed a minimum of two online courses within the past 2 years. The campus setting was a community college, (CHCC, a pseudonym) that as of the fall of 2019 had an enrollment of 11,673 students, with 2,090 enrolled exclusively in online courses and 2,820 enrolled in some online courses. An invitation to participate and an informed consent form were emailed to 1,300 students, and participants were accepted on a first come, first served basis. Eight participants from CHCC volunteered to participate in this study. Semistructured interviews were arranged with the eight responding students over the course of 1 month. Interviews were conducted via Zoom from my home office, with the door closed to ensure the participants' privacy and were scheduled on a day and time convenient for the participants. Participants' demographic details were not gathered because the focus was to understand external and

internal factors influencing persistence in online courses. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant before the interviewing process began.

### **Data Collection**

The participants' responses to the interview questions provided the necessary data for this basic qualitative study. IRB staff at the study site provided a contact list of participants who met the study criteria. An email was sent containing the participant invitation and consent form combined into one document to prospective participants. The instructions for participation in this study required interested individuals to respond to the email with the words "I consent." Once the consent was received, I sent an email thanking participants for agreeing to participate in the study, and I asked them for a convenient date and time to schedule their interview. From April to May 2021, participants' responses were collected from interviews. One 45-minute interview was conducted with each participant. A published instrument was not used to collect the data; interview questions for the study were used. The interview questions were designed to capture the participants' perspectives, beliefs, and feelings, while also providing insight to gain understanding of the underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). An interview protocol was used as the instrument to gather data to ensure creditability and dependability (see Merriam & Tisdell 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The interview questions were reviewed and approved by IRB staff and the dean of online learning at the study site, along with an expert reviewer who holds a doctorate in education.

Some initial written notes were recorded during the interview as a reminder for follow-up questions that came to mind while participants were speaking. However, note taking was kept to a minimum so that focus would remain on what the participants were saying. Participants' responses were clarified before moving to the next question. I also monitored each participant's body language during the interview. After the completion of each interview, I emailed the participant a \$10 Amazon gift card as an appreciation for their participation in the study.

Data were collected from eight students using semistructured interviews recorded via Zoom. The audio recordings were transcribed through Otter transcription service (<https://otter.ai>). The turnaround time for transcription was approximately 5 minutes. Upon receiving the transcriptions, I reviewed and emailed them to participants for their review and approval.

Follow-up emails were sent to each participant that included their individual transcribed interview to validate for accuracy. Transcripts were reviewed and confirmed from all participants within 4 days; however, there was not an established time set for the transcript review process. One participant added information to their transcript upon review. This information was added to the transcript as an addendum per the request of the participant.

The entire process, from the time the initial participant invitation and consent form emails were sent to participants to the conclusion of the transcript review, was completed in about 30 days. All eight participants answered the interview questions and completed the interview process.

Participants' information and copies of all electronic forms, transcripts, and notes were stored on a password-protected computer and encrypted flash drives. To ensure confidentiality of the data, I used numerical coding of the participants' information. The data were stored in my home office. No additional data were collected.

There were variations in the data collection from the plan presented in Chapter 3. The original proposed site was unable to process any research requests due to their IRB undergoing review, so an alternative institution was used. IRB at Walden University was notified of this change, and updated paperwork was submitted to reflect the changes. This change occurred prior to the submission of all completed documentation for Walden's IRB review; therefore, no additional actions were needed. The new study site provided a password-protected contact list of those participants who met the study criteria. These variations occurred prior to IRB approval and the data collection stage.

### **Data Analysis**

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using Otter software after each interview was completed. Next, each participant's transcript was printed and analyzed. The data analysis process began by using inductive coding, which included open coding of the data. The participants' responses to the interview questions provided data that needed to be sorted into broad categories. After completing the inductive coding process as recommended by Tracy (2019), I organized the data using NVivo. Utilizing both inductive coding and NVivo software helped me identify the themes and patterns in the data. There was no need for follow-up interviews for clarification or further explanation. The NVivo software provided links and connections according to



participants' responses. During the data analysis process, I reviewed patterns to ensure that the information was considered during the coding process. The themes and patterns were listed on a spreadsheet (see Appendix C). At the conclusion of the coding cycle, I identified three themes and nine patterns from participants' transcripts.

The conceptual framework for this study was based on the literature and served as a comparison for information captured during the study. Even though theory and literature formed the basis for this study, I relied on the responses of eight participants to identify the external and internal factors influencing persistence in online courses to discover emerging themes and patterns from the interviews and open-ended questions (see Appendix B). From the interviews, themes were identified that provided a better understanding of the participants' perceptions. The overall themes identified from participant responses were (a) perceived influence of individual characteristics on persistence in online courses, (b) perceived influence of student skills on persistence in online courses, and (c) perceived influence of external factors on persistence in online courses. The three themes are presented and explained as identified by the individuals who participated in the interviews.

### **Findings From Thematic Analysis**

#### **Theme 1: Perceived Influence of Individual Characteristics on Persistence in Online Courses**

The first theme that emerged from the data analysis was perceived influence of individual characteristics on persistence in online courses. Age was the number one

factor mentioned by participants when it came to persistence in online courses. B8 explained

I would say that students that have more maturity are more likely to persist in a course, until they reach an age where they have doubts about being too old for college. I had much better success in my courses, both grades and completion, after I reached a certain age, in my early 20s, than I did at an earlier age.

B4 stated “I think age is a factor because you have more experience.”

In addition to age, two participants identified learning disabilities as contributing factors to persistence in online courses. B12 stated “I was recently diagnosed with ADHD, which has affected my grades along with my concentration and short-term memory, but I keep going.” B6 stated “it’s been hard because I do had ADD, so I get distracted.” These participants spoke openly about how learning disabilities can impact persistence in online courses.

Several of the participants talked about the impact learning styles have on persistence in online courses. B4 stated “I’m the type of learner that hear it and write it down.” B12 stated “it is easier for me if I can put a story to it and then picture the story.” B14 stated “I am a visual learner.” Many participants identified themselves as visual learners; however, there was no evidence that one learning style was more effective than another in online learning.

## **Theme 2: Perceived Influence of Student Skills on Persistence in Online Courses**

The second theme to emerge from data analysis was perceived influence of skills on persistence in online courses. The first skill mentioned by several participants was

technical skills. Technical skills refer to the necessary skills needed to perform a particular task. B14 stated

computer skills are a really big thing you know, especially now that online learning has become such a big thing for people, and it does make things a lot easier since I work full time. So being able to just have an online class, instead of actually having to start my day to go to a classroom made it a lot better.

Being able to navigate through online courses was also addressed by participants. B10 stated “if you’re not computer literate and if you don’t know how to at least know the basics on how to wander around online, you’re not going to do well. You’re going to be very, you know, nervous and afraid.”

Participants also spoke about time management skills. All participants agreed that if a student does not have good time management in online learning, they will most likely not persist and will become frustrated. Time management skills are important to be successful with online courses. B4 explained

time management is huge. If you don’t manage your time, you’re going to be so far behind. I have a planner, I have it all written out. Day one, I make that planner out. I look at my entire week. Time management is super important, and it’s terribly important to also communicate that to the students.

Additionally, B6 stated

for me, it just depends. There are some classes where you don’t have assignments due weekly. One class, everything is due by the last day, however you turn it in, is up to you. The other legal research and writing we’ve had very few assignments,

and he'll give you an extension if you need it. My computer applications class, you have assignments due weekly and their modules. Since it's weekly, I look at the number of modules that are do and then I'll do math on how many I need to do a day to get a completed by Sunday at midnight.

Interpersonal communication skills were the third skill identified by participants. The level of social interaction was reported by various participants varied. Some participants felt that they needed interaction, and others did not feel that strongly about it. B2 stated "interaction is important. I need that human interaction." B10 stated that "being in a classroom provides the interaction and peer support that you really cannot get online"; however, B8 stated "some people are happier to be remote because there are no classroom distractions."

Reading and writing basic skills were mentioned by all participants. They felt that without these basic skills, students would not be successful. B4 stated "reading comprehension is very important, especially when you are trying to wrap your head around the concepts." B10 stated "if you can read and write the basics, you can't pass the classes." B14 explained

there are always discussion boards every week that was a popular thing in my online classes. So being able to write well, to articulate what you're trying to say, online, is important because you know, you don't get face to face, you know, value when you're having a conversation with someone. So, you must be careful about how you come off, you don't want to be perceived as rude or like you're telling someone your ideas are terrible.

During the interview process, 100% of the participants demonstrated knowledge of the necessary skills to successfully persist in online courses.

### **Theme 3: Perceived Influence of External Factors on Persistence in Online Courses**

The third theme that emerged from the data analysis was perceived influence of external factors on persistence in online courses. The first external factor mentioned by many participants was their support system such as encouragement from family and friends. B16 stated “I would say encouragement greatly influences persistence, because it’s good to know that people are watching you and rooting for your success.” B6 explained

I think being encouraged helps someone a lot, you know, just to hear you know, someone that’s not your mom or your sister say, wow, you’re doing a really good job. It makes you want to continue to do a good job, it makes you want to do better. If you don’t get that I feel like you can kind of, just think that you’re suffering all by yourself and nobody notices how much work you’re putting into it.

Most participants mentioned that it is important to have the support when it comes to persisting in online courses; however, B8 had a different perspective:

I would say that varies with an individual’s personality. For some people, the outside encouragement may be irrelevant, they need to find internal motivation to persist. Um, in a way, that was my issue, I’m one of them. I’m not a conformist. Um, a lot of the reasons that people suggested for why I should study instead of doing fun, things just didn’t seem convincing. Until I found internal motivation,

and things that connected with me as interesting as the coursework. Outside encouragement didn't really matter. Without the support of family members and friends to encourage, and build up confidence, many students have a hard time achieving their goals which could lead to a lack of persistence.

The second external factor mentioned was life circumstances such as family responsibilities, class time options, illnesses, and work hours. B10 explained

I think family responsibilities affect persistence tremendously, especially if you have any, there's a big difference in how it influences based on whether your family is supportive of what you're doing versus not supportive. If the kids can understand, well, you know, if you can do your homework the same time, you're not really missing out on family time, and the kids will be more likely to understand, I'm busy, she's doing her homework, you know. But I think you have to make sure that you schedule a specific time that you set aside to put school time and work aside, and I think that time becomes a lot more important, when you have a family and you're trying to go back to school and you're working, you got to remember to still make time for them.

Some of the participants had employers that were willing to work with them when it came to taking online courses. B14 stated

well, my job, I worked as a manager at Dunkin Donuts, and my bosses were really great. They would give me any time off, I wanted. I could tell them, hey, tomorrow, I have an exam and they'll be like, oh, great, you have like a good time, so trying to get time off for me was easy. I could take off, you know, weeks

at a time if it was during exams, and I was having a really hard time with it, they didn't care. So, it does it depends really, but online learning is meant to be flexible, and it's a good thing, because jobs are not always.

A few of the participants have unfortunately dealt with illnesses among themselves and family members while taking online courses, but still managed to persist.

B12 stated

my dad had been sick for 10 years, so towards the end, it was, it was very difficult to go to attend class and then after he passed away, it was very difficult, and then my mom has a lot of health issues. So, it does influence it a lot, because there's times, I've had to leave class to go deal with whatever's going on with her, and I had to leave class a lot when my dad was passing away. So yeah, outside crisis's really do affect it a lot, but I just I kept going because I knew my dad would be proud of me because he wanted me to do the sign language program. So that actually has influenced me to keep going because I know that that's one of the things, he really wanted for me.

B14 explained

within my last semester of school, I got diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and you know, it means that you lose mobility, so it means, you know, going to school or even really like online stuff is kind of difficult. So, because it was my last semester before I graduated, you know, I still have that motivation to do whatever I could to graduate.

## **Results**

The findings from the data analysis provided valuable information in answering the research questions regarding external and internal factors influencing persistence in online courses. Participants' responses were descriptive regarding their experiences with taking online courses. Under the three research questions below, three themes are listed that emerged from the analysis of the participants' responses. Theme 1 emerged from RQ1 perceived influence of individual characteristics on persistence in online courses. Characteristics identified consisted of individual's (1) age, (2) learning disabilities, and (3) self-reported learning styles. Theme 2 was identified from RQ2 perceived influence of student skills on persistence in online courses. Student Skills identified by participants were (1) technical skills, (2) time management skills, and (3) interpersonal communication skills. Finally, Theme 3 was identified from RQ3 perceived influence of external factors on persistence in online courses. The external factors identified by participants were (1) support system, (2) life circumstances.

Analysis, as presented here, includes quotes from the participants whose pseudonyms are B2, B4, B6, B8, B10, B12, B14, and B16. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' privacy.

### **Research Question 1**

How do students perceive that individual student characteristics influence their persistence in online courses? Students perceived that their age, learning disabilities, and self-reported learning styles influenced their persistence in online courses.



### *Age*

All eight participants stated that an individual's age might greatly influence persistence in online courses. Statements regarding participants' perception of age include:

- “Being too young you're not heavily motivated sometimes.” (B2)
- “Age can help with having a better motivation, and ability to organize tasks. People through their teen years are weaker at keeping track of tasks. Those who are a bit older probably have some system to make checklists and schedules and have a calendar or have things of this nature taught to them from working, and then just transferring it over to their other activities—college, and family life. So, yeah, I think that age can have a real benefit for persistence.” (B8)
- “The younger generation is used to online classes and learning. The older you are the more difficult it might be to get used to this sort of thing” (B14)
- “Age does play a factor when it comes to online persistence, but I believe it depends on the individual.” (B16)

### *Learning Disabilities*

Two of the participants mentioned that learning disabilities can influence a student's persistence in online courses. Statements from those participants include:

- “Personally, it's been hard because I do have ADD, so I get distracted.” (B6)

- “I just was recently diagnosed with ADHD, and they said it’s worse than they thought it was, so that has affected my grades and things. This doesn’t mean I’m stupid. It just means I learn a different way.” (B12)

### ***Self-Reported Learning Styles***

The fourth student characteristic identified by some participants was learning styles. Statements from participants include:

- “I think it depends on the learning style. I am the kind of person who needs interaction, I’m a note taker, I must write things down in order to learn it. So, I’m the type of learner, I hear it, I write it down; it helps me to retain information. It also helps that I can go back and learn from that information.” (B4)
- “I personally learn better when I’m in a classroom setting.” (B6)
- “I basically need, like, some clarification, but, you know, luckily, I have, you know, the ability to read it and understand it, make notes for myself to help myself.” (B10)
- “I’m more visual. If I can put a story to it, and picture the story, then it’s easier for me to learn.” (B12)
- “Some people are very visual learners like I am. So, depending on the class itself, online learning can be very difficult for me. There was definitely a learning period to where it was like, okay, I have to be able to have other resources to find the answers I need, since I’m not getting the visual that I need.” (B14)

- “Just because you’re not doing well in that class doesn’t mean that you have not grasp all of the concepts that are necessary to go forth. In taking, you know, those classes further, I mean, as an example, I’ve got like a 2.5 in one of my classes, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have the knowledge that is needed to go forward and take another class in the same subject period.” (B16)

### **Research Question 2**

How do students perceive that their skills influence their persistence in online courses? Students perceived that their skills in technology, time management, and interpersonal communication influenced their persistence in online courses.

#### ***Technical Skills***

All eight participants mentioned that if student’s taking online courses did not have a have the necessary technical skills needed to persist, they would not be successful and could possible dropout. Statements from participants include:

- “100% it’s a big one. It’s very important to know how to work a computer to navigate through all the apps and software, you got to know how to update stuff, and go to the settings or to look something up.” (B2)
- “I think that it’s important to have some sort of computer literacy. If not, it’s going to take you longer.” (B4)
- “If you don’t have the computer literacy, I don’t see you being able to take classes and complete them successfully in any way, shape or form. Honestly, you’re going to be afraid.” (B10)

- “Obviously, if you know what you’re doing, because they’ve given us programs, and I’m like, I don’t know what the heck that is. If something goes wrong, I must consult my children to figure it out, but I make it work and I keep going.” (B12)
- “So, I’m not very literate with that sort of thing, so there’s a learning curve.” (B14)

### ***Time Management Skills***

All eight participants discussed the importance of time management. Participants’ statements include:

- “If you don’t manage your time, you’re not going to get it done. You’re not going to complete it and you’re going to be like, dang, I just wasted everybody’s time.” (B2)
- “Time management is huge. If you don’t manage your time, you’re going to be so far behind.” (B4)
- “For me, it just depends on if there are some classes where you don’t have assignments do weekly.” (B6)
- “So, time management is definitely a part of study habits. I didn’t have good study habits, so I had not done you know, much of the reading during that course. Someone who doesn’t have an effective method of scheduling and tracking due dates, and pacing things out, will do worse on average, in their courses.” (B8)

- “I have a student planner, where I write down every single assignment for every single class. The first thing I do each semester is to take my class schedules and I put them in this planner for what is due when what I should be reading.” (B10)
- “You have to have really good time management skills and being a squirrel has not been beneficial to me.” (B12)
- “Time management is really, really important for online learning. Not every online class is solely like go at your own pace, you know, a lot of them most of them that I had, they, you know, had due dates for specific things like you had, this weeks’ worth of work, and it had to be done, you know, like by Sunday at 11:59.” (B14)

### ***Interpersonal Communication Skills***

The aim of communication online is designed to be the same as face-to-face communication but a few of the participant felt that the level of social interaction in online courses were different than attending an in-person course. Some participants’ statements include:

- “The interaction is what made me motivated to go to class because I took two classes that were online real time, and one was just straight online. The online real time, love, love the classes, not just online, hated it. I’m like, I need that human interaction. I need to be able to see faces, hear people gain connections, make connections, make friendships, I need to know my professor.” (B2)

- “When you’re in a classroom setting, you can sit down, compare notes, you know, hey, here’s how I work this out if you write it out. And being able to communicate something like that through email, takes a lot more time to say.”  
(B4)
- “I don’t think it’s really the interaction in all cases that makes a difference. But people’s preferences or comfort with computer interaction. Some people might be happy to be remote because they find the classroom distracting. They find it harder to when they’re around other people with background noises and things. So, for some people, that computer format of a, an online course, could be wonderful.” (B8)
- “My entirely online classes, I find that I will touch base with my instructors, once a week, once every other week, that kind of thing, just as it is an email or what not, just to touch base with them to make sure like, I’m on the right track. I think if I had a classroom time every week, where we’re all there, and there’s no instructor saying, okay, this is about what you should be working on. You should have already had this done. You know, you’re going from here, and you have any questions about this? You know, I think having that, I think would be extremely helpful, as opposed to entirely online on your own.”  
(B10)
- “Courses are better taken online depending on what the course is. For me personally, like, I took my human anatomy class in person. And this was like, right before the pandemic started. I did very well in that class. But like my

other biology courses that I took online, I ended up having to repeat them. Or I got like the minimum grade required under pressure temp. It really speaks to my success as a student because I know I'm capable of getting better than 2.5 in those classes, so I will say it all depends on the class." (B16)

All the participants agreed that to be successful in online courses, you will at least need basic reading and writing abilities. Participants' statements include:

- "Reading and writing is the foundation to comprehending, understanding, to getting the knowledge necessary to advance yourself. If you don't have those two necessary skills, I would suggest going to online tutoring." (B2)
- "Reading comprehension is very important, especially when you're trying to learn new, trying to learn new things or learn a new concept, it's important to be able to wrap your head around that." (B4)
- "If you don't have basic reading and writing, there's really only so much that a tutor can do." (B10)
- "Reading and writing, I think plays a very big part, because, when you learn online, you read everything, like they might have videos or PowerPoints, but you're still reading essentially, all the material. And writing is such a big part, I think, in really any form of learning." (B14)

### **Research Question 3**

How do students perceive that external factors influence their persistence in online courses? Student perceived that their support system, and life circumstances influenced their persistence in online courses.

### *Support System*

Many of the participants stated that their support system which included encouragement and support from family and friends played a major role in their persistence with online courses, while one participant felt that it really had no impact.

Participant statements included:

- “I think it’s very important to be encouraged. Even if it’s just by one person, I think, having that motivates you more, or, you know, you’re like, okay, well, I’m really doing this, someone’s acknowledging it. Okay, I can do this. It helps you stay focused; makes you feel empowered. And I think it helps you complete something to get it done. To have someone be aware that you know, like, okay, wow, thank you. Because it’s nice to hear and it helps motivate you.” (B2)
- “Surrounding yourself with good supportive people is very important, and that people who know your situation is good and is going to help you. If they weren’t as supportive, I probably wouldn’t have them in my life for sure. But I hope that it wouldn’t affect my ability to stay persistent in my studies.” (B4)
- “I have like, my aunts, my uncles, I’ve got a lot of friends that are very supportive, and they’re very proud of me. They always like, if I need a pep talk, they’ll be the first to send you like a what feels like a 20 paragraph like you can do it.” (B6)



- “I would say that varies with a personality. For some people, the outside encouragement may be irrelevant, they need to find internal motivation to persist.” (B8)
- It makes you feel good. Because you are going back to school because you want to better yourself, you want to further your education in your life. And people think oh my gosh, that’s so cool. I think that support really affects your persistence.” (B10)
- “I think it would depend on the type of personality you have. I don’t think it influences me a whole lot.” (B12)
- “I think being encouraged helps someone a lot, you know, just to hear someone that’s not your mom or your sister say, wow, you’re doing a really good job. It makes you want to continue to do a good job, and it makes you want to do better. If you don’t get that, I feel like you can kind of just think that you’re suffering all by yourself and nobody notices how much work you’re putting into it.” (B14)

### ***Life Circumstances***

All eight of the participants stated that various life circumstances influenced their persistence in online courses. Life circumstances consist of family priorities, class time options, illnesses, and hours of employment. Participants’ statements regarding family priorities include:

- “Family always comes first.” (B2)

- “You can repeat a course, but you can’t repeat life events that have to be given priority.” (B8)
- “I think they affect it tremendously. There’s a big difference in how it influences based on whether your family is supportive of what you’re doing versus not supportive. If the kids can understand, well, you know, if you can do your homework the same time, this time, you’re not really missing out on family time. And the kids will be more likely to understand, I’m busy, she’s doing her homework, you know. But I think you must make sure that you schedule a specific time that you set aside to put school time work aside, and I think that time becomes a lot more important.” (B10)

The second life circumstance to be discussed by a couple of the participants were class time options. Statements from those participants included:

- “I’m doing open scheduled courses, so anytime during these days, you can complete this work and submit it. That means I can continue my full-time job, and this won’t interfere.” (B8)
- “I had two classes, on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, so we always scheduled so that I was either off those days, or I was out in plenty of time to be home to do my class.” (B10)

The third life circumstance mentioned was illnesses. Five of the participants stated that illnesses could impact persistence, but they continued their online courses despite the adversities. Statement from those participants included:

- “I think it depends on the type of person you are. How your, of thinking is, your self-determination and your will set. For me personally, I was born sick. Having an online option, was life changing because of I still can’t go physically, I can have the laptop with me in the hospital. You know, if I’m sick, I can have a laptop in bed with me. You know, I don’t have to go anywhere. Get ready. I don’t have to look put together nothing. And I think that helps. It helped so much having the online option.” (B2)
- “It can be a bit stressful because day to day, you don’t know if it’s going to be a good health day or bad health day. And that does take a toll on the energy that you’ll have to put into work. And wears on your patience because when you don’t feel well, you don’t feel well, and you don’t want to do anything.” (B6)
- “I suffer from Fibromyalgia as well as arthritis and multiple joints, and the Fibromyalgia is throughout top to bottom. So, when I have flare ups of my medical issues I can’t focus on classes. I can’t retain what I’m learning.” (B10)
- “My dad had been sick for 10 years. So, towards the end, it was very difficult to go to class. I just I kept going because I knew my dad would be proud of me for because he wanted me to do the sign language program too. So that actually has influenced me to keep going because I know that’s one of the things, he really wanted for me.” (B12)

- “Within my last semester of school, I got diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. It means that you lose mobility, so it means, you know, going to school or even really like online stuff is kind of difficult. Since it was my last semester before I graduated, I still have that motivation to do whatever I could to graduate.”

(B14)

The last life circumstance mentioned by some participants was hours of employment.

Statements from participants include:

- “I am very lucky that my job approved me to be given some paid time off to attend school. So, it’s been nice, I feel very blessed to have that situation because working full time I spent all my day when I’m done working, I clock out from the computer upstairs and clock into the computer downstairs until I go to bed. So, it’s a lot of time.” (B4)
- “I think that makes a very big effect. If your hours of employment, are set on a set schedule, obviously, that’s great because you can schedule your time around your work and know that you work here to here. So therefore, you can focus on class. I think if you have a schedule that jumps around, I think it would be considerably more difficult.” (B10)
- “I owned a personal training studio, and I close it two weeks before the pandemic hit. And I closed it because it was very difficult to go to school, and the amount of extra work.” (B12)
- “Trying to get time off for me was easy. I could take off, you know, weeks at a time if it was, you know, during exams.” (B14)

There were no discrepant cases within the data analysis process. All the participants addressed the questions in a clear manner, and no responses were unclear or confusing. It was important to capture the experiences of every participant in the study.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In Chapter 3, trustworthiness for qualitative research in relationship to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were discussed. In this section, the implementation of strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the research are addressed.

#### **Credibility**

To ensure credibility, interviews were audio recorded, and verified that data collected was accurate by using member checking, along with a peer-review. Recording the interviews ensured accuracy of the data and allowed me to review the data as often as needed. Having the recorded transcript also removed any bias that may have taken away from the interviews or misinterpreting a participant's true meaning to the questions asked during the interview process. Member checking was significant to the creditability of my research (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016); therefore, member checking was used to ensure that participants reviewed their interview transcripts to confirm information captured during the interview process and that information given were based on their own perceptions. The interview transcripts were sent to each participant to verify that the information was accurate and honest to the best of their ability. This process also gave the participants the opportunity to add or edit information within the transcript provided. The interview questions were reviewed prior to the interview process by the IRB staff and the dean of online learning at CHCC, along with an expert reviewer who holds a doctorate in

education. The expert reviewer also reviewed the data analysis to check for accuracy and bias of the information provided. Data saturation was achieved once there was no new information provided by participants and no new themes identified. Creditability was also established by acknowledging my position as an administrative staff member at a large Midwestern community college with each participant.

### **Transferability**

To ensure transferability, a detailed description of the setting was provided, and findings which included sufficient quotes from participants (see Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). Data collected through audio recordings was transcribed using Otter software to ensure data was captured, reviewed, and presented. A purposeful sample of eight individuals who were 18 and older, not enrolled in dual or early middle college, and had completed a minimum of two online courses within the past 2 years were selected for this study.

### **Dependability**

To ensure dependability, all responses were verified with the participants to ensure the accuracy of the data collected. Once this process was completed, themes were able to be reviewed that emerged from the participants during the interview process. Also, participants' exact responses were used from their interviews to highlight various themes.

### **Confirmability**

Realizing that my own biases and prejudices could affect the interpretation of data, the data was checked and rechecked, and I held myself accountable throughout the

process (see Ravitch & Mittenfelmer, 2016). Transcription software was used to lessen the chance of any personal bias in transcribing the interview recordings. The coding of data was done manually and by use of NVivo coding software program. Employing two mechanisms to code the transcribed data, increased reliability, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the results.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore students' perceptions on the external and internal factors that contribute to their persistence in online courses at a Midwest community college in the United States. The participants selected through a purposeful sampling process, provided their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions regarding external and internal factors that contributed to their persistence in online courses. From the participants' responses, a better understanding of external and internal persistence strategies emerged. Based on the research questions that guided this study, semistructured interview questions that explored students' perceptions on factors that influence their persistence in online courses were developed.

Three themes emerged from the participants' responses to the interview questions. These included perceived influence of individual characteristics on own persistence in online courses, perceived influence of student skills on own persistence in online courses, and perceived influence of external factors on own persistence in online courses. These themes were supportive of the three research questions. The theme, perceived influence of individual characteristics on persistence in online courses, relate to the first research question on how students perceive that individual student characteristics influence their

persistence in online courses. The theme, perceived influence of student skills on persistence in online courses, relate to the second research question on how students perceive that their skills influence their persistence in online courses. The theme, perceived influence of external factors on persistence in online courses, relate to Research Question 3 on how students perceive that external factors influence their persistence in online courses.

In Chapter 5, I provide an interpretation of the findings. I explain limitations of the study to the trustworthiness and recommendations for further research. I discuss the potential opportunities for social change that may arise from the study's findings, and recommendations to increase persistence in community college online learning courses.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this study, students' perceptions were explored regarding the external and internal factors that contributed to their persistence in online courses at a Midwest community college in the United States. This study was needed because it focused on students' perceptions of the external and internal factors that influenced their persistence in online courses. Eight participants were interviewed to collect data pertinent to the purpose and research questions of this study. The findings of this study indicated that students perceived that their individual characteristics, student skills, and external factors influenced their persistence in online courses.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

#### **Findings in the Literature**

Findings related to aspects identified in the literature review included students' perceptions of the external and internal factors that influenced their persistence in online courses. The themes discussed were students perceived that their individual characteristics influenced their persistence in online learning, students perceived that their skills influenced their persistence in online courses, and students perceived that external factors influenced their persistence in online courses. Chapter 5 provides an overview of what findings confirmed, disconfirmed, and added to the literature.

#### ***Confirmed Findings in the Literature***

The first theme derived from the current study was perceived influence of individual characteristics on persistence in online courses (RQ1). The findings confirmed the literature addressing certain student demographics such as age of students enrolled in

online courses (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Rizvi et al., 2019; Shea & Bidjerano, 2019; Wladis, 2017). Current participants mentioned many students under the age of 24 were not as serious about online learning as those who were older and more mature. According to Henderikx et al. (2019), the more experienced an individual is with online course taking, the lower the challenges will be. Some current participants identified their learning disabilities as having an influence on their persistence in online courses. McManus et al. (2017) concluded that major learning barriers were the impact of a student's disability, personal circumstances, and the learning environment. Many of the current participants reported that learning styles influence persistence in online courses. Participants perceived that students may do better in online courses if they are in a blended format that is delivered effectively. The findings in the literature confirmed that blended learning offers flexibility (Futch et al., 2016; Horvitz et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2016; Tratnik et al., 2019).

The next theme derived from the current study was perceived influence of student skills on persistence in online courses (RQ2). The findings confirmed the literature identifying student skills needed when taking online courses. Many of the current participants had a difficult time adjusting to taking 100% of their courses online because they were accustomed to having more interaction with faculty and classmates. According to Nadasen and List (2016), nontraditional students will typically struggle with online courses when there is limited in-person socializing among faculty and peers. Students also face technology issues, including having the skill level to work on a computer or issues connecting to the internet (De Paepe et al., 2018). Participants in the current study

perceived that if a person is lacking the basic technology skills, they will have issues navigating online courses. Some participants expressed not being comfortable working on group assignments, which was consistent with Gillette-Swan's (2017) finding that students may experience anxiety over the use of technology, may feel uncomfortable with group assignments, and may have trouble working with peers on group presentations. Social interaction was found to be a key factor in online learning (Blakey & Major, 2019; Damary et al., 2017). Bourdeaux and Shoenack (2016) concluded that students expect clarity and respect when it comes to online learning. Making sure that students are prepared to take online courses increases their chances of a successful outcome (Bourdeaux & Shoenack, 2016). In online courses, selecting the right faculty, choosing initial classroom assignments, scheduling contact times, and having a strong campus support system are strategies to maintain persistence (Simplicio, 2019). Yeh et al. (2019) concluded that for students to be successful in online learning, institutions must look at students' learning readiness and motivational factors. Online learning readiness is closely related to the success of learning in the online environment (Liu, 2019). Soffer and Cohen (2019) concluded that students must be able to work independently to juggle schedules and meet deadlines, have excellent time management skills, prioritize, and commit when it comes to online courses.

The last theme derived from this study was perceived influence of external factors on persistence in online courses (RQ3). Participants identified their support system and life circumstances as external factors influencing persistence. Many participants mentioned that having a support system gave them encouragement they needed to push

through their online courses. Kibaru (2018) concluded that to help online students become successful in online coursework, the institution must have improved, updated maintenance when it comes to technology and administrative support to help students overcome any issues. When COVID-19 put an end to face-to-face classes in 2020, faculty had concerns with student support, access to digital materials, and the guidance and tools for being able to work from home (Johnson et al., 2020).

### ***Disconfirmed Findings in the Literature***

Data collected from this study showed no evidence that students persist at a higher rate in traditional classroom settings as opposed to online courses. Huntington-Klein et al. (2017) and Olson and Johnson (2015) concluded that students are less likely to obtain a degree if they take online classes instead of classes in a traditional setting. Ortagus (2017) revealed that students who are employed full-time, are married, have children, or are veterans represent a lower portion of those enrolled in online courses. According to the literature, online learning has increased and offers students a flexible way of learning outside of the traditional classroom setting. Addressing students' issues with online courses could prove beneficial in promoting their persistence in online courses. Current findings suggest that future research is needed on students' perceptions of online versus traditional coursework and demographics.

### ***Contribution to the Literature***

Findings from this current study added knowledge to the literature by reporting qualitative data on the factors that students perceived as an influence on their persistence in online courses. The qualitative data captured students' experiences and perceptions

through one-on-one interviews. Students who persisted in online courses perceived that age, learning disabilities, learning styles, technical skills, time management, interpersonal communication, support system, and life circumstances played a major role in their persistence in online courses. Factors identified by students had a positive impact on their persistence in online learning.

### **Support of Findings in the Conceptual Framework**

The online learning persistence of the participants was viewed through the lenses of Rovai (2003) CPM, which was derived from Tinto's (1975) theory on student retention and Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory on student attrition. The conceptual framework provided the basis for understanding online persistence of the participants in this study. The theoretical perspective reported in the literature regarding Rovai's CPM acknowledged key factors that influence a student's persistence decision in online courses. Factors of the framework indicated by the current participants that influenced their persistence in online courses included student characteristics (age, learning disabilities, self-reported learning styles), student skills (technical skills, time management skills, and interpersonal communication skills), and external factors (support system and life circumstances). Rovai's prior-to-admission and after-admission categories were also present in Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's models. Rovai addressed the impact the external factors had on shaping students' perceptions, reactions, and commitments, which was lacking in Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's models. It was evident from the current participants' responses that external and internal factors influenced their persistence in online courses. The findings of the study affirmed that

Rovai's student characteristics and skills prior to admission, and external and internal factors affecting students after admission, have a great impact on students' persistence decisions.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were two limitations in this study. The first limitation was that only one institution was used to explore the perceptions from participants who were 18 and older, were not enrolled in dual or early middle college, and had taken a minimum of two online courses within the past 2 years. The second limitation was the use of only eight participants for this study. According to Crouch and McKenzie (2016) eight to 12 participants are sufficient for a basic qualitative study; however, a larger sample of participants might have provided more insight on persistence in online learning.

### **Recommendations**

Although this study indicated external and internal factors that influence persistence in online courses from eight participants, it would be useful to see whether the responses would be similar or different with a bigger sample size. Also, expanding this research to other community colleges would increase understanding of students' decision to persist in online courses.

Future researchers could consider a study on the impact of student demographics and persistence in online courses. Shea and Bidjerano (2019) concluded that the demographics of community college students can cause challenges when completing courses and the overall success of online learning. Another recommendation is to interview faculty to understand their perceptions of student persistence in online courses.

During the current study, many participants provided closing comments that they wanted to share on the need for faculty training in online courses. Participants felt as though they were being asked to do things online that faculty were not familiar with. Increasing the knowledge of online faculty through professional development is important to student success in online courses. According to Richardson et al. (2020), professional development training for faculty increases the quantity and quality of online learning.

Future researchers could also explore the success of blended learning and the success of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the current study did not include participants in online blended courses, some participants emphasized that they prefer blended courses. Some researchers suggested that students are more successful when they take blended courses (Futch et al., 2016; Horvitz et al., 2019; Ryan et al, 2016). In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to pivot to online learning. Many faculty members and students are still adapting to this new way of learning (Oskoz & Smith, 2020), so future research is needed on the success of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Implications**

This study has a few implications for positive social change and educational practice. This study also has the potential to impact students taking online courses, students in higher education institutions, and the community.

#### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

This basic qualitative study provided data that may be used to enhance community colleges' online learning. The data collected from the study participants have

the potential to influence persistence in online learning and effect positive social change in the college environment and the community. Understanding students' perceptions of the external and internal factors that contribute to their persistence in online courses may promote positive social change by creating awareness among administrators regarding the development of strategic initiatives related to student persistence in online courses, which could result in improved student success rates.

### **Implications for Educational Practice**

External and internal factors influence students' persistence in online courses. Identifying those students who may not succeed in online courses early in the program may allow for institutional interventions that could strengthen students' persistence in online learning. High-quality advising is also important because many of the current participants spoke about the lack of communication with some of their instructors and advisors. A higher level of communication may encourage a stronger sense of belonging. Participants in the study also felt as though there was a lack of interaction with their peers, and they needed the interaction so that they did not feel isolated. Online institutions can create formal and informal interaction opportunities in their course design to promote student-to-student interaction in the online setting. The institutions could also stay alert to students' needs by monitoring their behaviors and achievements. Finally, institutions could establish mechanisms that would let them know what is or is not working with online programs. One current participant shared that their instructor had them do a final assignment providing feedback to future students on how to be successful in online learning.



## Conclusion

Lower persistence rates of community college online learners have been an issue, even though online enrollment has increased in recent years. Several quantitative studies have shown that community college students who take online courses have a lower performance and completion rate than those who take in-person courses; however, there was no empirical evidence related to the perceptions of the external and internal factors that contributed to student persistence. Rovai's (2003) CPM synthesized Tinto's (1975) traditional student retention theory and Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition theory. Rovai concluded that there was no way to ensure student persistence, but institutions should strengthen their orientation programs and student support for online learners.

The results of the current study showed that students perceived that their individual characteristics (age, learning disabilities, and self-reported learning styles), student skills (technical skills, time management skills, interactive skills, and reading and writing skills), and external factors (support system, and life circumstances) influenced their persistence in online courses. Student persistence in online learning is multifaceted. Every student has different needs, expectations, experiences, and challenges. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach when addressing student persistence; however, institutions play a vital role in the success and persistence of every student. Therefore, institutions should provide quality online environments and employ strategies to encourage students to succeed.

## References

- Abdous, M. (2019). Well begun is half done: Using online orientation to foster online students' academic self-efficacy. *Online Learning*, 23(3), 161–187.  
<https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i3.1437>
- Allen I. E., & Seaman, J. (2015). *Grade level: Tracking online education in the United States*. <http://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradelevel.pdf>
- Allen I. E., & Seaman, J. (2018). *Grade level: Tracking online education in the United States*. <https://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradeincrease.pdf>
- Allen, I. E., Seaman, J., Poulin, R., & Straut, T. T. (2016). *Online report card: Tracking online education in the United States*.  
<http://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/onlinereportcard.pdf>
- Amankwaa, L. (2016). Creating protocols for trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, 23(3), 121–127.
- American Association of Community Colleges. (n.d.). *About us*.  
<https://www.aacc.nche.edu/about-us/>
- American Association of Community Colleges. (2019). *Challenges to success*.  
DataPoints. [https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/DataPoints\\_V7\\_N6.pdf](https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/DataPoints_V7_N6.pdf)
- American Association of Community Colleges. (2020). *Fast facts*.  
[https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/AACC\\_Fast\\_Facts\\_2020\\_Final.pdf](https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/AACC_Fast_Facts_2020_Final.pdf)

- Arhin, V., & Wang'eri, T. (2018). Orientation programs and student retention in distance learning: The case of University of Cape Coast. *Journal of Educators Online*, 15(1), 1–12. <https://doi-org.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/10.9743/JEO2018.15.1.6>
- Babcock, A., Lehan, T., & Hussey, H. D. (2019). Mind the gaps: An online learning center's needs assessment. *Learning Assistance Review (TLAR)*, 24(1), 27–58.
- Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55(4), 485–540. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543055004485>
- Blakey, C. H., & Major, C. H. (2019). Student perceptions of engagement in online courses: An exploratory study. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 22(4), 1–11. <https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter224/blakeymajor224.html>
- Bourdeaux, R., & Shoenack, L. (2016). Adult student expectation and experiences in an online learning environment. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 64(3), 152–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2016.1229072>
- Bozkurt, A., Insung Jung, Junhong Xiao, Vladimirschi, V., Schuwer, R., Egorov, G., Lambert, S. R., Al-Freih, M., Pete, J., Olcott Jr., D., Rodes, V., Aranciaga, I., Bali, M., Alvarez Jr., A. V., Roberts, J., Pazurek, A., Raffaghelli, J. E., Panagiotou, N., de Coëtlogon, P., & Shahadu, S. (2020). A global outlook to the interruption of education due to COVID-19 pandemic: Navigating in a time of uncertainty and crisis. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), 1–126. <https://doi.org//10.5281/zenodo.3878572>

- Brubacher, M. R., & Silinda, F. T. (2019). Enjoyment and not competence predicts academic persistence for distance education students. *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning*, 20(3), 165–179.  
<https://doi.org//10.19173/irrodl.v20i4.4325>
- Burkholder, G. J., Cox, K. A., & Crawford, L. M. (2016). *The scholar-practitioner's guide to research design*. Laureate.
- Carales, V. D., Garcia, C. E., & Mardock, U. N. (2016). Key resources for community college student success programming. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2016(175), 95–102. <https://doi.org//10.1002/cc.20215>
- Chan, M. (2017). Have you been oriented? An analysis of new student orientation and e-orientation programs at U.S. community colleges. *College & University*, 92(2), 12–25.
- Community College Research Center. (2013). *What we know about online course outcomes*. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/what-we-know-about-online-course-outcomes.pdf>
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (n.d.). *Regional accrediting organizations*. <https://www.chea.org/regional-accrediting-organizations-accreditor-type#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20is%20divided,programs%20or%20schools%20within%20institutions>
- Crouch, M., & McKenzie, H. (2006). The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, 45(4), 483-499.  
<https://doi.org//10.1177/0539018406069584>

- Cumming, T., & Miller, M. D. (2019). Academic assessment: Best practices for successful outcomes with accreditation evaluation teams. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2019(186), 81–93. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20359>
- Damary, R., Markova, T., & Pryadilina, N. (2017). Key challenges of on-line education in multi-cultural context. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 237, 83–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2017.02.034>
- De Paepe, L., Chang, Z., & Depryck, K. (2018). Drop-out, retention, satisfaction and attainment of online learners of Dutch in adult education. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 17(3), 303–323.
- Duesbery, L., Frizelle, S., Twyman, T., Naranjo, J., & Timmermans, K. (2019). Developing and designing open border teacher Education programs: Case studies in online higher education. *Journal of Educators Online*, 16(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.9743/jeo.2019.16.1.2>
- Edwards, Y., & Faradj, H. (2019). To blend or not to blend: A case study of on-line learning in General Biology. *HETS Online Journal*, 9, 122–136.
- Folk, K. (2019). Evaluating the impact of a first-year experience on student success at a distance learning university. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 22(4), 1–16.
- Frey, B. (2018). *The SAGE encyclopedia of educational research, measurement, and evaluation* (Vols. 1-4). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506326139>

- Futch, L., DeNoyelles, A., Thompson, K., & Howard, W. (2016). "Comfort" as a critical success factor in blended learning courses. *Online Learning*, 20(3), 140-158.  
<https://doi-org.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/10.24059/olj.v20i3.978>
- Gering, C. S., Sheppard, D. K., Adams, B. L., Renes, S. L., & Morotti, A. A. (2018). Strengths-based analysis of student success in online courses. *Online Learning*, 22(3), 55–85. <https://doi.org//10.24059/olj.v22i3.1464>
- Gillett-Swan, J. (2017). Supporting and engaging the isolated learner. *Journal of Learning Design*, 10(1), 20–30. <https://doi.org//10.5204/jld.v9i3.293>
- Golden, J. E. (2016). Supporting online faculty through communities of practice: Finding the faculty voice. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International*, 53(1), 84–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2014.910129>
- Gregory, C. B., & Lampley, J. H. (2016). Community college student success in online versus equivalent face-to-face courses. *Journal of Learning in Higher Education*, 12(2), 63-72.
- Grover, K. S., & Miller, M. T. (2018). Issues facing community college job training programs: A Delphi approach. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 66(3), 170–175. <https://doi.org//10.1080/07377363.2018.1525523>
- Grubbs, S. J. (2020). The American community college: History, policies, and issues. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 52:2, 193-210.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2019.1681385>
- Hart, J., & Park, S. (2019). Exploring nontraditional community college students' motivational experiences for goal achievement in a blended technology course,

*Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 45:2, 124-128.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2019.1647903>

Henderikx, M., Kreijns, K., Castaño Muñoz, J., & Kalz, M. (2019). Factors influencing the pursuit of personal learning goals in MOOCs. *Distance Education*, 40(2), 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2019.1600364>

Higher Learning Commission. (2020). *Current criteria accreditation*.

<https://www.hlcommission.org/Policies/criteria-through-august-31-2020.html>

Hizer, S., Schultz, P., & Bray, R. (2017). Supplemental instruction online: As effective as the traditional face-to-face model? *Journal of Science Education & Technology*, 26(1), 100–115. <https://doi-org.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/10.1007/s10956-016-9655-z>

Horvitz, B. S., Garcia, L. R., Garza Mitchell, R., & Calhoun, C. D. (2019). An examination of instructional approaches in online technical education in community colleges. *Online Learning*, 23(4), 237-252.

<https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i4.1613>

Huntington-Klein, N., Cowan, J., & Goldhaber, D. (2017). Selection into online community college courses and their effects on persistence. *Research in Higher Education*, 58(3), 244-269. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-016-9425-z>

Huston, J., & Minton, T. (2016). Comparison of course completion rates in intermediate algebra based on term and modality. *International Forum of Teaching & Studies*, 12(2), 18–25.

- Jian S., & Waugh, M. L. (2018). Online student persistence or attrition: Observations related to expectations, preferences, and outcomes. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 16*(1), 63–79.
- James, S., Swan, K., & Daston, C. (2016). Retention, progression and the taking of online courses. *Online Learning, 20*(2), 189–210.
- Johnson, N., Veletsianos, G., & Seaman, J. (2020). U.S. faculty and administrators' experiences and approaches in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Online Learning, 24*(2), 6-21. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i2.2285>
- Joosten, T., & Cusatis, R. (2019). A cross-institutional study of instructional characteristics and student outcomes: Are quality indicators of online courses able to predict student success? *Online Learning, 23*(4), 354-378. <https://doi.or/10.24059/olj.v23i4.1432>
- Kibaru, F. (2018). Supporting faculty to face challenges in design and delivery of quality courses in virtual learning environments. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 19*(4), 176–197. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17718/tojde.471915>
- Kolbe, T., & Baker, B. D. (2019). Fiscal equity and America's community colleges. *Journal of Higher Education, 90*(1), 111–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1442984>
- Kolbrún F. (2018). The impact of different modalities on student retention and overall engagement patterns in open online courses, *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 31*:1-2, 53-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2017.1381129>



- Kolski, T., & Weible, J. L. (2019). Do community college students demonstrate different behaviors from four-year university students on virtual proctored exams? *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 43(10–11), 690–701. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2019.1600615>
- Kozakowski, W. (2019). Moving the classroom to the computer lab: Can online learning with in-person support improve outcomes in community colleges? *Economics of Education Review*, 70, 159–172. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2019.03.004>
- Liu, J.C. (2019). Evaluating online learning orientation design with a readiness scale. *Online Learning*, 23(4), 42–61. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i4.2078>
- Lowenthal, P. R., Gooding, M., Shreaves, D., & Kepka, J. (2019). Learning to teach online: An exploration of how universities with large online programs train and develop faculty to teach online. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 20(3), 1–9.
- McComb, B. E., & Lyddon, J. W. (2016). Understanding the effectiveness and impact of student success interventions on campus. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2016(175), 83–94. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20214>
- McManus, D., Dryer, R., & Henning, M. (2017). Barriers to learning online experienced by students with a mental health disability. *Distance Education*, 38(3), 336–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2017.1369348>
- Meade, C. (2019). Online education for a community college on Montserrat? Are we there yet? *Distance Learning*, 16(3), 35–43.

- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research : A guide to design and implementation* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., Vol. 1). Jossey-Bass.
- Milman, N. B. (2016). Resources and factors to consider when designing new online programs (cover story). *Distance Learning*, 13(1), 45-48.
- Mitchell, S. A. (2017). Online learning: No worries at community colleges. *HETS Online Journal*, 7, 5–20.
- Mohammadi, A., Grosskopf, K., & Killingsworth, J. (2020). An experiential online training approach for underrepresented engineering and technology students. *Education Sciences*, 10(3), 46. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10030046>
- Mollenkopf, D., Vu, P., Crow, S., & Black, C. (2017). Does online learning deliver? A comparison of student teacher outcomes from candidates in face-to-face and online program pathways. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 20(1), 1–10.  
[https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/spring201/mollenkopf\\_vu\\_crow\\_black201.html](https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/spring201/mollenkopf_vu_crow_black201.html)
- Montelongo, R. (2019). Less than/more than: Issues associated with high-impact online teaching and learning. *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice & Research*, 9(1), 68–79. <https://doi.org/10.5929/9.1.5>
- Morgan, H. (2020). Best practices for implementing remote learning during a pandemic, the clearing house: *A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 93:3, 135-141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2020.1751480>

- Morales, C. R. (2019). Supporting and connecting e-learners. *Community College Journal*, 89(5), 6–7.
- Nadasen, D., & List, A. (2016). Using community college prior academic performance to predict re-enrollment at a four-year online university. *Online Learning*, 20(2), 225–238. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v20i2.800>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *Fast facts: Distance learning*. <https://nces.ed.gov/>
- Newman, I., & Covrig, D. (2013). Building consistency between title, problem statement, purpose, & research questions to improve the quality of research plans and reports. *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development*, 25(1), 70–79. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nha.20009>
- Olson, S. J., & Johnson, K. K. J. (2015). Online learning for community college student's success. *ATEA Journal*, 42(2), 19–22.
- Ortagus, J. C. (2017). From the periphery to prominence: An examination of the changing profile of online students in American higher education. *Internet & Higher Education*, 32, 47–57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.09.002>
- Oskoz, A., & Smith, B. (2020). Unprecedented times. *CALICO Journal*, 37(2), i–vii. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cj.41524>
- Park, C., Perry, B., & Edwards, M. (2011). Minimizing attrition: Strategies for assisting students who are at risk of withdrawal. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International*, 48(1), 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2010.543769>

- Perry, B., Boman, J., Care, W. D., Edwards, M., & Park, C. (2008). Why do students withdraw from online graduate nursing and health studies education? *Journal of Educators Online*, 5(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.9743/JEO.2008.1.2>
- Ravitch, S. M., Mittenfelner Carl, N. (2016). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. Sage.
- Richardson, J. W., Lingat, J. E. M., Hollis, E., & Pritchard, M. (2020). Shifting teaching and learning in online learning spaces: An investigation of a faculty online teaching and learning initiative. *Online Learning*, 24(1), 67–91. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i1.1629>
- Rizvi, S., Rienties, B., & Khoja, S. A. (2019). The role of demographics in online learning; A decision tree-based approach. *Computers & Education*, 137, 32–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.04.001>
- Rospigliosi, P. (2020). How the coronavirus pandemic may be the discontinuity which makes the difference in the digital transformation of teaching and learning, *Interactive Learning Environments*, 28:4 383-384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1766753>
- Rovai, A. P. (2003). In search of higher persistence rates in distance education online programs. *Internet & Higher Education*, 6(1), 1-16. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(02\)00158-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(02)00158-6)
- Rubin, H. J., Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Sage.
- Ryan, S., Kaufman, J., Greenhouse, J., She, R., & Shi, J. (2016). The effectiveness of blended online learning courses at the community college level, *Community*

*College Journal of Research and Practice*, 40:4, 285-298.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2015.1044584>

Saldana, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Sage.

Salley, W., & Shaw, M. (2015). Employment status, teaching load, and student performance in online community college courses. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 18(2), 1–14.

Shaw, M., Burrus, S., & Ferguson, K. (2016). Factors that influence student attrition in online courses. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 24–31.

[https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/fall193/shaw\\_burrus\\_ferguson193.html](https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/fall193/shaw_burrus_ferguson193.html)

Shea, P., & Bidjerano, T. (2016). A national study of differences between online and classroom-only community college students in time to first associate degree attainment, transfer, and dropout. *Online Learning*, 20(3), 14–25. <https://doi-org.ezp.waldenlibrary.org/10.24059/olj.v20i3.984>

Shea, P., & Bidjerano, T. (2019). Effects of online course load on degree completion, transfer, and dropout among community college students of the State University of New York. *Online Learning*, 23(4), 6–22.

<https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i4.1364>

Simplicio, J. S. C. (2019). Strategies to improve online student academic success and increase university persistence rates. *Education*, 139(3), 173–177.

Snart, J. (2017). Hybrid learning at the community college. *New Directions for Teaching & Learning*, 2017(149), 59–67. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20227>

- Soffer, T., & Cohen, A. (2019). Students' engagement characteristics predict success and completion of online courses. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 35(3), 378–389. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12340>
- Stoebe, A. (2020). The effect of new student orientations on the retention of online students. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 23(2), 1–9.
- Swanger, D. (2016). Community colleges partners in community development. *Planning for Higher Education*, 45(1), 13–49.
- Sublett, C. (2019). Examining Distance Education Coursetaking and Time-to-Completion among Community College Students, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 43:3, 201-215.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2018.1453889>
- Sublett, C. (2019). What do we know about online coursetaking, persistence, transfer, and degree completion among community college students?, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 43:12, 813-828.  
<http://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2018.1530620>
- The Association of Community College Trustees. (n.d.). *A guide to the election and appointment of community college trustees*. <https://www.acct.org/article/guide-election-and-appointment-community-college-trustees>
- Thomson, A. (2018). Three interconnected distance learning education challenges. *Community College Enterprise*, 24(2), 74–77.

- Thor, L., & Moreau, J. (2016). Leveraging technology to create a student-focused environment. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2016(176), 73-78.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20224>
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>
- Tracy, S. J. (2019). *Qualitative research methods: Collection evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). John Wiley & Sons.
- Tratnik, A., Urh, M., & Jereb, E. (2019). Student satisfaction with an online and a face-to-face Business English course in a higher education context. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International*, 56(1), 36–45.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2017.1374875>
- Travers, S. (2016). Supporting online student retention in community colleges. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 17(4), 49-61.
- Volchok, E. (2019). Differences in the performance of male and female students in partially online courses at a community college, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 43:12, 904-920. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2018.1556134>
- Wladis, C., Conway, K. M., & Hachey, A. C. (2016). Assessing readiness for online education - research models for identifying students at risk. *Online Learning*, 20(3), 97–109. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v20i3.980>

- Wladis, C., Conway, K., & Hachey, A. C. (2017). Using course-level factors as predictors of online course outcomes: A multi-level analysis at a US urban community college. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(1), 184-200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1045478>
- Wynants, S., & Dennis, J. (2018). Professional development in an online context: Opportunities and challenges from the voices of college faculty. *Journal of Educators Online*, 15(1), 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.9743/JEO2018.15.1.2>
- Yeh, Y.C., Kwok, O.M., Chien, H.Y., Sweany, N.W., Baek, E., & McIntosh, W.A. (2019). How college students' achievement goal orientations predict their expected online learning outcome: The mediation roles of self-regulated learning strategies and supportive online learning behaviors. *Online Learning*, 23(4), 23-41. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i4.2076>
- Youngju L., Jaeho C., & Taehyun K. (2013). Discriminating factors between completers of and dropouts from online learning courses. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 44(2), 328–337. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2012.01306.x>



## Appendix A: Participation Invitation Email

Hello,

My name is Lori Tucker, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. For my doctoral dissertation research, I am seeking participants for a study on community college students who have successfully completed two or more online courses. The purpose of my research is to explore student perceptions on external and internal factors that influence persistence in online learning. The information that is obtained from these interviews has the potential to assist fellow students as they embark on their college careers while balancing other aspects of their lives.

If selected and you participate in the interview process, a \$10 Amazon gift card will be awarded to you after completing the interview process.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and all information and identity will remain confidential. Interviews will take approximately 45 minutes to complete, and to adhere to social distancing guidelines, interviews will be conducted via Zoom, Skype or phone. If you choose to participate, you may choose to discontinue participation at any time without any repercussions.

If you interested in participating or have any questions, please contact Lori Tucker, who will be conducting the research at [lharr001@waldenu.edu](mailto:lharr001@waldenu.edu).

Thank you,

Lori Tucker, Doctoral Candidate, Walden University

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Lori Tucker. Thank you for agreeing to take part in my study and consenting to be interviewed. As the email mentioned, I am gathering information on the factors of the online learning environment that contribute to student persistence in online courses. Your insight will help to better understand why students stay or withdraw from online courses. As previously discussed, the interview will last approximately 45 minutes – does that still work for you? I want to assure you that the information you share with me will remain strictly confidential and will not be identifiable in my dissertation. If at any point during the interview you would like for me to stop, please let me know. You completed a consent form stating that I have your permission to audio record our conversation. Are you still okay with me recording our conversation today so that I can accurately capture what you share with me? For the questions I am about to ask you, please answer in as much detail as possible, and don't hesitate to ask for further clarification if you do not understand a question. If you have no further questions, I would like to ask for your permission to start with our first question.

IQ1. How and to what extent do you perceive age, ethnicity and gender as influencing persistence?

IQ2. How and to what extent do you perceive intellectual development as influencing persistence?

Probing: Can you provide some examples of intellectual development?

IQ3. How and to what extent do you perceive academic performance as influencing persistence?

IQ4. How and to what extent do you perceive academic preparation as influencing persistence?

Probing: Can you provide more details on academic preparation and online learning?

IQ5. How and to what extent do you perceive computer literacy as influencing persistence?

Probing: Can you provide more detail on the impact computer literacy has on online learning?

IQ6. How and to what extent do you perceive information literacy as influencing persistence?

IQ7. How and to what extent do you perceive time management as influencing persistence?

Probing: Can you provide some examples of time management?

IQ8. How and to what extent do you perceive reading and writing as influencing persistence?

IQ9. How and to what extent do you perceive computer-based interaction as influencing persistence?

Probing: Can you elaborate on importance of interaction in the online learning environment?

IQ10. How and to what extent do you perceive finances as influencing persistence?

IQ11. How and to what extent do you perceive hours of employment as influencing persistence?

IQ12. How and to what extent do you perceive family responsibilities as influencing persistence?

Probing: Can you elaborate on how your family responsibilities impacted your persistence?

IQ13. How and to what extent do you perceive outside encouragement as influencing persistence?

IQ14. How and to what extent do you perceive opportunity to transfer influencing persistence?

Probing: Can you provide one example of how opportunity to transfer influence persistence?

IQ15. How and to what extent do you perceive life crises as influencing persistence?

Probing: Can you provide some examples of life crises situations that may have an impact on persistence?

This will conclude my questions for you. Is there anything else you would like to add or is there anything you feel I should know that my questions may not have addressed?

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with me today. I really appreciate your time and willingness to share. Everything that you have shared with me is helpful to my study. If I have any follow-up questions, may I contact you again? Again, thank you for participating in my study and have a wonderful day. Goodbye.

## Appendix C: Themes by Research Questions

Research Question	Themes by Research Questions	Patterns
<p><i>RQ1</i>: How do students perceive that individual student characteristics (age, ethnicity, gender, academic performance, academic preparation) influence their persistence in online courses?</p>	<p>Perceived influence of individual characteristics on persistence in online courses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Learning Disabilities</li> <li>• Self-reported Learning Styles</li> </ul>	<p>Age</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maturity level</li> </ul> <p>Learning Disabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diagnosed with ADHD</li> <li>• Hard to concentrate</li> </ul> <p>Self-reported Learning Styles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual learner</li> <li>• I'm a note taker</li> <li>• Need clarification</li> <li>• I put a story to it</li> </ul>
<p><i>RQ2</i>: How do students perceive that their skills (computer literacy, time management, reading and writing) influence their persistence in online courses?</p>	<p>Perceived influence of student skills on persistence in online courses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technical Skills</li> <li>• Time Management Skills</li> <li>• Interpersonal Communication Skills</li> </ul>	<p>Technical Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Computer skills</li> <li>• Know how to navigate</li> </ul> <p>Time Management Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study habits</li> <li>• I structure my time</li> <li>• Scheduling</li> <li>• Tracking due dates</li> <li>• I have a planner</li> </ul> <p>Interpersonal Communication Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group projects</li> <li>• Love online real time</li> <li>• Communicate with instructor and peers</li> <li>• I miss the interaction</li> <li>• Should have basic reading and writing skills</li> <li>• Reading is huge</li> <li>• Comprehension</li> <li>• Being able to write and articulate what you are saying is important for online discussions</li> </ul>

<p><i>RQ3</i>: How do students perceive that external factors (family responsibilities, hours of employment, crisis, etc.) influence their persistence in online courses?</p>	<p>Perceived influence of external factors on persistence in online courses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Support System</li><li>• Life Circumstances</li></ul>	<p>Support System</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Encouragement and support from family</li><li>• Encouragement and support from friends</li></ul> <p>Life Circumstances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family priorities</li><li>• Class time options</li><li>• Illnesses</li><li>• Hours of employment</li></ul>
---	---	---