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Building University Relationships: A Holistic Approach to Student Success in Online Learning Environments

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BUILDING UNIVERSITY RELATIONSHIPS: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO STUDENT
SUCCESS IN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

BUILDING UNIVERSITY RELATIONSHIPS: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO STUDENT
SUCCESS IN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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Online learning in the higher education sector has grown exponentially over the past 15 years.

Whereas online learning was once a viable alternative for the nontraditional adult student,

enrollment trends now show an influx in traditional students opting for virtual education

opportunities especially in the last three years during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there has

been exponential growth in online learning, the rates of attrition have also significantly

increased, making it difficult for institutions to retain their online students. This qualitative

narrative inquiry study will explore the impact of authentic relationships on student success,

engagement, and overall persistence in online learning environments. The research used in this

review is timely and relevant for the current student climate that continues to reflect increases in

online learning as well as enrollment of both traditional and nontraditional students who have

conflicting priorities (work, personal life, and scholarly pursuits). Data compiled here will seek

to provide details that support a teacher culture while considering authentic engagement,

collective ownership, communication, and human centeredness as avenues for increased student

success. It will explore internal and external factors contributing to and/or hindering student

success and seek to identify effective and innovative student service practices that foster

increased engagement and retention in online student learning environments. This dissertation is

available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu) and OhioLINK ETD Center

(https://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: higher education, student success, nontraditional student, retention, engagement,

university, enrollment, online learning, storytelling

Dedication

I dedicate my thesis work to the heroines in every one of my memories: my grandmothers, mother, and daughters. Thank you for teaching me that pearls and proper hats are always appropriate, how to sew, how to bake, how to draw, how to love unconditionally, how to be strong when faced with the toughest battles, how to laugh through the hard days, how to rattle the stars, and that being a mother is the greatest blessing. This is for each of you. Without your love and support through this journey I would not have had the courage to do this.

Acknowledgements

Earning my doctorate has been a dream of mine since my very first job in higher education. The stories of my students inspired me to finally take the journey. Each of those stories is unique, and every single one of them taught me something that shaped my dissertation into this beautiful patchwork that is full of loss, heartache, love, and ultimately victories worth celebrating. I would like to acknowledge and thank all of the students I have worked with throughout my career and especially those willing to share their stories for this dissertation. I have so much respect and gratitude for all of you.

I would also like to thank my very understanding family, that had to fend for themselves countless times over the last three years. Most notably in the last year when we lost everything in a fire and health issues threatened to take away the backbone of our family. Despite this, each of you encouraged me to keep going when I wanted to give up. To my husband, Roger, thank you for the constant reminder that we have a 100% success rate for bad days and for being my person, always. To my oldest daughter, Aly, thank you for making me a mother and encouraging me to rattle the stars and dare to dream bigger; your drive and determination inspire me always. To my sweet youngest daughter, Avery, thank you for being the bright light on a dark day and bringing me joy and laughter; being your mom is one of my greatest blessings. I am so proud of both of you. To my parents, thank you for teaching me that hard work always prevails and telling me as a little girl that I could be anything that I wanted when I grew up; I hope this makes you proud. I love you all.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the inspiration that my chair and committee provided throughout this journey. Dr. Jonathan Eskridge, thank you for first allowing me to teach you everything I knew about student service and then for being willing to serve as a sounding

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

"My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know."
-- bell hooks

Background

I've got to go my house is on fire! Nine words that would forever change the trajectory of my life. Two weeks into the spring semester of 2023 (my final semester), I was finishing up my last research interview when a fire destroyed everything in my home including a portion of my dissertation work. As I combed through the ashes of what was left of my home, I realized that the days and months that followed could break me or teach me a lesson that I had been trying to teach my students throughout my career. *You can only control what is in your power to control, and others can only help if you let them.* I had said those words to my students thousands of times during my tenure, and now I had a choice. Do I take my own advice, or do I let this derail my plans? The answer came slowly through the outpouring of messages of support from my cohort members, faculty, colleagues in higher education, and students. *Keep going, do this work for them, the students you serve.*

A month later, I finally spoke to the student I was meeting with when the fire occurred. The student was the final participant in this research study. We cried together. The student and I had many conversations over the years, so the tears came from the reciprocal and authentic relationship we had built. We mourned the loss of my home while celebrating their victory of finishing a bachelor's degree, together. The tears we shared were filled with joy, respect, and pride, and the losses caused by the fire became an afterthought. The student gave me the strength to keep going, pick up the pieces of the research, and begin again. The stories of these students

are powerful, unique, and deserve to be told so that future students and universities can learn from them.

The loss I experienced was much like the rationale for the methodology I chose for this dissertation. Like many of the studies into the higher education landscape, my loss and journey to rebuilding were quantitative, in that to everyone but those truly effected were quantifiable in facts and figures. However, the loss was anything but quantitative to my family. I had a running narrative in my head of each memory attached to something that was lost. Each moment spent within the walls of the home resulted in smiles, tears, triumphs, and victories. It was qualitative and could only be understood with the sharing of the stories and feelings each memory provided. Thus, this study could only be completed in a way that could allow readers to hear the stories through the voice of the student, so that by understanding and acknowledging their narrative we could begin to understand their journey and create change in the university landscape.

Positionality

I began my career in higher education in 2007, working at a small private liberal arts college in rural Ohio in the financial aid department serving traditional students. From there I ventured into career and technical education where I worked with nontraditional students, incarcerated students, and veterans in a financial aid and admissions capacity. I realized while working with nontraditional students that I felt called to serving that particular group because of their unique needs that resonated with my particular focus on relationships and authenticity. In early 2014, I accepted an administrative position at a liberal arts degree completion institution. The college had five physical campuses and created an online division that was preparing to launch in the summer of 2014. The delivery model would be fully online asynchronous, and it

would serve students from all over the world. Nine years later, I am now in a leadership position at The University and serve as a faculty member and advisor to bachelor's degree students.

My work with students has changed since I have become an advisor and faculty member and developed a teacher mindset. Working with students online has allowed me an opportunity to be creative in my practices as faculty and advisor. By allowing myself to become a learner, critically reflect on my practice, and personalize my strategies to fit individual student needs, I am able to create a culture of trust and respect with the students that I serve. After years of practice, I have formed a relational structure and method with my students that use aspects of engaged pedagogy, storytelling, social constructivism, and deep learning to promote authentic engagement, communication, collective ownership, and human centeredness not for only student success but for promoting empowerment and purpose.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of relational and holistic approaches to student success in online learning environments through university relationships. Specifically, building relationships with advisors, staff, or faculty that lead to increased communication, engagement, and overall persistence. It will also touch on the importance of a teacher culture in online learning environments that fosters engagement, collective ownership, and empowerment at all levels of the university. The study will employ critical reflection and authenticity while using narrative inquiry and social constructivist theory and epistemology to focus the research on qualitative data collected.

Traditionally, institutions of higher learning have placed an enormous amount of pressure on faculty to not only teach, foster engagement with students, but also to implement retention strategies passed down through the university hierarchy. This has created a disconnect between

all levels of the institutional system and the students they serve. This study will investigate the notion that students need support from all areas of the university in order to foster engagement that leads to persistence. The switch to online learning modalities has only exacerbated the divide in student persistence and completion strategies and models that provide notable and quantifiable success. Institutions and researchers are now struggling to find systematic reference models that can address all variables of engagement in the online environment.

The gap in research and data of these specific variables must be addressed and a multi-departmental approach to student engagement and retention could be the key. Tong et al. (2018) examined a new conceptual model for "student-staff partnerships" and identified values such as "authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community and responsibility" as key deliverables of transformative and sustainable student success practices (p. 19). Various departments (stakeholders) and their roles at the institutions all have an opportunity to provide valuable student support through the identification and addressing of student motivations, creation and implementation of multifaceted orientations, and assessment of both the student and university system.

Importance of the Research Questions

In order to fully understand the student experience journey, universities must be able to identify both what students need and want and what makes them successful in terms of university support. While support services such as financial aid, academic advising, disability support, tutoring, and registrar are offered in most universities, true connection rarely extends beyond the classroom environment. The research questions set up a framework that focuses on allowing students to be heard by building opportunities outside of the classroom by implementing a teacher culture throughout the university system. By researching perceptions and

lived experiences of students through narrative interviews, identification of policies and practices that foster a holistic (whole-person) method of student success can be achieved. In addition, correlations between student success, perception, and the likelihood to move into future programs can be identified.

Research Questions

The research questions will seek to guide the study and explore student success through the lens of relationship building and authenticity to address student persistence and completion.

- **Research question 1.** (RQ1) How have the relationships built within the university influenced the overall student experience?

    - **Sub question 1a.** (SQ1a) Are there relationships outside of faculty and/or advisors being built?

- **Research question 2.** (RQ2) Do university relationships and culture play a role in student engagement, persistence, and overall success?

- **Research question 3.** (RQ3) How do university relationships with students influenced the likelihood of students continuing their education either with the same institution or with another?

Research Participant Parameters

This study will focus on bachelor's degree completion students who meet the following criteria:

- Must have been an (online) student at The University in the last three years.

- Must have had at least 24 credits of undergraduate transfer work.

- Must be at least 35 years of age.

- o While 24 years of age is the traditional age threshold, to ensure that students have had significant life and/or work experience, 35 years of age was chosen for this study.
- Must have taken transition/orientation course or interdisciplinary core writing course.
- Must have met with advisor and/or faculty member at least once via phone or zoom to form an academic plan, career plan, or other future plan.

Definition of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, the definitions provided below are to provide clarity for the reader due to varying ways they are represented in literature and research.

Asynchronous Learning/Distance Education/Online Learning – a type of learning, education, and/or teaching that does not occur at the same place or at the same time as face-to-face learning. Most generally, asynchronous learning is completely online through prerecorded lessons, online discussions, email correspondence, and chat features (Schlosser & Simonson, 2010).

Authentic Engagement – interaction that fosters a culture of trust and mutual vulnerability. It is a partnership free from bias that is intentional, empathetic, and sincere.

Collective Ownership – the idea that a group of people shares ownership. As it relates to this study, collective ownership relates to student success and fostering a culture of inclusion and relationship building at all levels of the university.

Human Centeredness – allowing people (motivations, needs, and wants) to be at the forefront of decision-making processes.

Nontraditional Students – nontraditional students are defined as over the age of 24,

attended one or more colleges, are financially independent, employed full-time while

attending a post-secondary institution, have served in the military, and/or have

dependents other than a spouse (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Note: In this study nontraditional students used are over the age of 35 and have had prior college

experience of at least 24 credit hours.

The Role of Researcher

I am a faculty member, advisor, and administrator at the institution where the study took

place. My employment at the institution began in 2014, and I have extensive insight into the

policies, procedures, institutional culture, as well as expert knowledge in academic

programming, practical applications, and student trends. In addition, I am the faculty member of

record for one of the courses required in the first semester of study at the institution. The course

was developed in part as preparation for this doctoral research study and to address online

retention, persistence, and completion rates at The University and develop a model of advising

and student success that can be shared with other institutions.

Assumptions

As scholar-practitioner with over 15 years of experience working in higher education, I

have been developing my own theories and assumptions of student needs and motivations as they

relate to persistence, engagement, and completion during my tenure. In the last five years, I have

used authentic engagement, collective engagement, human centeredness, and communication

strategies to increase student success and relationships in my own practice as faculty and advisor.

During that time, I have noticed an influx of returning students, higher persistence, and

completion rates, and heard anecdotal evidence from students about the importance of the

relationships and holistic approaches to student engagement and its contribution to student success. This study, however, sought to prove that those strategies impact overall student success, contribute to a better university culture, and lead to continuing education.

Delimitations

There are two delimitations that I, as researcher, would like to address in relation to the study. Students selected as part of the study each had a prior or current student-faculty or student-advisor relationship with me. The institution has a limited faculty, advising, and administrative staff, so all students would have had to worked with me in some capacity. Secondly, the sample of students was selected in semi-purposive method via colleague requests, student community groups at the institution, and alumni networking. According to Creswell (2003), nonprobability sampling is not generalizable to the population in qualitative studies; however, due to the importance of the work in relation to the university, some delimitation was unavoidable. The fully online bachelor's degree students are all required to take the same course(s) in the first term and interact with me as an advisor due to the staffing limitations mentioned previously. Therefore, efforts to critically reflect and analyze the data were employed to introduce more validity and reliability in the resulting data and gave reasoning for using a semi-purposive sampling.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter I provides a brief background as well as an introduction into the purpose and relevance of the study and my scholar-practitioner mindset. I also present the research questions along with a look into the selection of the research participants. Finally, in Chapter I, I give an overview of key terms, finish by establishing my role as the researcher, and give an overview of the methodology used throughout the study. Additionally, in my role as researcher I provide

insight as to why this study is valuable to the higher education culture and what prompted the work.

Chapter II reviews relevant theoretical and empirical literature from adult learning and nontraditional student theory, engaged pedagogy, storytelling, and critical reflections of practice. This chapter will also explore student engagement, challenges, motivations, and models for student success.

Chapter III explores narrative inquiry and relevant methodology and validates my reasons for selecting this method for my research. Chapter III will also describe my data collection procedures and analysis along with the ethical considerations and findings due to the nature of my position within study. Lastly, it will present the theoretical framework of the research.

Chapter IV presents the data through student reflections and storying, both qualitative and quantitative findings and finally data analysis. Chapter IV will also explore possibilities for further work.

Finally, Chapter V returns to the literature to present a summary discussion, recommendation for practical applications, implications, conclusion, and intersectionalities found within the various theories discussed.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of literature will focus on several core areas of background information and research in relation to the study. First, the literature review provides a look at the growth of online education in the last three years and the emergent need to address quality, accessibility, and interaction in virtual learning environments. Second, this chapter will address student and university motivation in relation to current pedagogies, practices, and theories that support engagement. Finally, it will conclude with exploring literature surrounding theories relevant to higher education student success to provide context for theoretical framework and research design.

As of the fall of 2020, 11.8 million students in the United States were taking at least one online course (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), but some university leaders continue to be skeptical of virtual learning success and the ability to give the same or better instruction online as in the traditional classroom. Even so, while students continue to enroll in online courses, universities are divided on whether or not online learning is as effective as classroom despite the evidence of increased enrollment trends. However, enrollment in traditional universities and colleges continues to decline students opting for online only learning continues to rise (Allen & Seaman, 2014, p. 4). Despite the evidence of growth of online learning programs, universities are struggling to find ways to motivate their stakeholders because:

> many in key leadership roles continue to demonstrate a startling lack of insight into the power and promise of, in particular, online education now occurring at all educational levels" making it difficult to implement changes and contributes to declining morale and divided opinions throughout the university system regarding online learning strategies. (Beaudoin, 2016, p. 144)

"Pervasive resistance" to online learning among key stakeholders adds to the tension and prohibits an innovative and transformative environment where student enrollment and engagement can flourish (Beaudoin, 2016, p. 144).

While institutions agree that "online education is critical to the long-term strategy," there continues to be disagreements in just how to use online modalities to support university motivations without compromising teaching and learning (Allen & Seaman, 2014, p. 8). In addition, there is much debate about how to keep students fully engaged in an environment that is constantly evolving. Cuseo (2018) suggests that key to providing quality online education is the emergence and accessibility of technology and the navigation of faculty-student interaction, faculty-university interaction, university-student interaction, and student/-student interaction through pedagogy that supports technology as a gateway for student success. However, technology alone will not replace human interaction and the genuine need for students for students to feel heard.

Exponential Growth Calls for Change

Despite the 186% growth rate from 2019 to 2020 of undergraduate students exclusively enrolled in online undergraduate programs, institutions are still struggling to retain their students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). It is important to note that much of the growth in online programming is due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While some higher education institutions employed fully online programming prior to 2020, much of the growth noted from 2019 to 2020 can be attributed to the World Health Organizations declaration of a pandemic that forced institutions to cancel classes or move to fully remote instruction (Brown, 2021). In a matter of days, classes were moved online and students who had never completed online

coursework were moved to fully remote instruction and, in some cases, fully asynchronous instruction, furthering the chaos and uncertainty happening around the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought swift changes and growth to the higher education landscape that created a transformation in perceptions, insights, and quality of online learning. Whereas online learning was once viewed as a less effective delivery module, the pandemic allowed university stakeholders to envision a future where online and in-person classes could work together, as data started to surface. Even though institutions were fighting attrition in online programs, according to a study completed by Wiley Education Services, over 78 percent of students who have taken online courses feel their experiences were the same or better than the classroom experience (Magda et al., 2020, p. 31). Cuseo (2018) theorizes that the key to providing quality online education is the emergence and accessibility of technology and the navigation of faculty-student interaction, faculty-university interaction, university-student interaction, and student-student interaction through a pedagogy that supports technology as a gateway for student success. Brown (2021) also supports Cuseo's theory as noted in the levels of student engagement.

1. Learner-learner engagement: This includes activities such as discussion boards and various other of sharing experiences and resources among students. Notably, a feeling of community and belonging in a class can help students to disclose their experiences, allowing students to learn experientially.

2. Learner-instructor engagement: This focuses on communication between the instructor and student, which is an important predictor of student success and achievement. Through modeling positive behaviors and establishing presence, the instructor can foster the learners' sense of community.

3. Learner-content engagement: This consists of the organization of instructional materials and planned activities, which is another component of engagement crucial to student success. In other words, it refers to the time students are involved in reviewing instructional content such as textbook, video, audio, and interactive games (Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Brown, 2021, p. 1).

As noted, technology alone will not replace human interaction and the genuine need for students to feel heard and be engaged with the learning. A model that addresses all aspects of engagement is needed to fully support the needs of online students.

Stone and O'Shea (2019) theorize that online learning can be isolating and that a strong support system is a requirement for students to be successful (p. 5). Many nontraditional students are alone in their educational endeavors with little or no support systems at home or work. They turn to their cohorts (if those models are present), fellow students, and university employees for connection and engagement. In Choi and Park (2018), external factors such as support systems or lack thereof are often the leading "uncontrollable factor/predictor" of student success and engagement. Their empirical data also cites motivation as a subset of support systems in its contribution to student engagement practices (Choi & Park, 2018, p. 16). However, finding true connection is not always an achievable task. Roadblocks such as institutional hierarchy, stakeholder ownership, and outdated practices and standards are prevalent in university culture, making it difficult for students to navigate a clear path to success and support.

Ruben (2004) suggests key stakeholders need to "revision [their] theories" to be inclusive at all levels of institutional hierarchy (p. 423). Change begins first with a desire to change the culture of interaction with students through authentic engagement, collective ownership, communication, and human centeredness. The current system is not completely damaged, as it

still functions successfully but without a human-centered approach that students in virtual environments need. Daly (2010) writes that innovation "emerges between rather than within people" (p. 98). Daly goes on to theorize that distributed leadership is important for knowledge sharing and community engagement (both internally and externally). With that theory in mind, change must employ both empathetic and creative practices. Knowledge sharing becomes a way to celebrate differences, create shared experiences, and liberate our minds to advance change throughout the university culture (Jobin-Leeds, 2016, p. xx). In order to be empathetic toward one another, the literature shows that universities must change their thinking strategies with regard to knowledge sharing of student service practices. That sharing is less about knowing and more about understanding and relationship building.

Student and University Motivation

Before universities can address student engagement and persistence practices, they must first understand student motivation. Student motivation is much more complex than university motivation and more widely reviewed in the literature. Perhaps the most important of those factors are self-appraisal and self-efficacy. Sedlacek (2017) describes realistic self-appraisal in students as being able to "recognize and accept any strengths and deficiencies, and works hard at self-development; recognizes the need to broaden his or her individuality" (p. 142). If students do not possess realistic or positive self-appraisal, universities must be prepared to address and provide solutions for healthy development of those traits. Students who can identify their strengths and weaknesses often know how to express their needs, which allows for better dialogue with university faculty and staff. This area of development is critical for universities to understand and recognize when considering student retention and success strategies. Hoffman et al. (2019) suggest that "identity is concerned with one's personal self-awareness, it follows that

identity formation (individuation) is in a continual state of development" (p. 9). Universities

should be able to identify the state of development in their students to engage their individual

needs.

In addition to self-appraisal, a strong internal (university) and external support system is

also important for student success and overall motivation. There is an influx in first in the family

and older students who not only need support and encouragement to enroll in a degree program,

but they also need support from family/friends and internally from the universities where they

are enrolled. While universities have little control over external factors, internally faculty and

staff have opportunities to increase student motivation. In a 2007 study, Leondari applies a future

time perspective study (FTP) to adult learners to evaluate self-concept, and in turn, motivation

(p. 17). Leondari's view supports the notion that educators through teaching students have the

influence to increase motivation.

> Adult educators can be instrumental in how adult students approach new content areas by
> facilitating and encouraging a learning environment that provides positive reinforcement
> and rewards the learners' behaviors to increase their level of self-efficacy. (Leondari,
> 2007, p. 22)

> Chen and Jang's (2010) research into student motivations suggests that online instructors

should make their virtual classrooms a safe place for students to be themselves.

> In order for online instructors to better understand their students' needs, and adopt
> appropriate strategies to support their students, we suggest that online instructors create
> an open, interactive, and learner-centered atmosphere for students to freely express their
> feelings, thoughts, and concerns. (Chen & Jang, 2010, p. 750)

Further, their research found that students who were motivated and unmotivated should not be

classified into groupings. Motivation is emotionally attached to student need and wants (or, in

this context, goals). Therefore, support for student should be personalized and linked to

motivation and student need or risk "adverse–even worse than 'no effects'–outcomes It is

through the enhancement of students' perceptions of autonomy, relatedness, and competency that

makes contextual support effective and meaningful to online students" (Chen & Jang, 2010, p. 750).

Lee and Pang's (2014) study on the theory that motivation orientations of nontraditional students were indicators of student success suggested that students with the most educational background were the most likely to persist and be influenced by intrinsic motivations. The five motivations included personal development, career advancement, social pressure, social and communication improvement, and escapism (Lee & Pang, 2014, p. 5). They concluded that intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivations were indicators of success because of the willingness to participate fully in the learning. They suggest that universities invest in the "quality human capital which is a key driver of economic growth" by adjusting services to fit motivation orientations of their students (Lee & Pang, 2014, p. 14).

Motivation continues to be an important part of the student journey in that learners it influences their education decisions. In addition, universities must consider both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations when developing online learning programs so that their needs can be met on both levels. In many cases students want to feel (intrinsic) connected to their education while still gaining something (extrinsic) in return (usually tangible) so that their investment in the learning has a physical and emotional manifestation (Lee & Martin, 2017).

University motivations can be classified in two primary areas: student enrollment and student engagement. While student enrollment encompasses budget concerns and other factors (marketing, costs, visibility) contributing to a successful university model, student engagement focuses on persistence, completion, and ultimately success. A key factor in university motivation to consider is that "many in key leadership roles continue to demonstrate a startling lack of insight into the power and promise of, in particular, online education now occurring at all

educational levels," making it difficult to implement changes and contributing to declining

morale and divided opinions throughout the university system regarding online learning

strategies (Beaudoin, 2016, p. 144). "Pervasive resistance" to online learning among key

stakeholders adds to the tension and prohibits an innovative and transformative environment

where student enrollment and engagement can flourish (Beaudoin, 2016, p. 144).

Authentic Engagement

Naturally, authentic engagement provides a strong foundation for student success

strategies. Authentic engagement cannot be present with dominant ideology, power play, or

institutional hierarchy that places students in the position of not having freedom to be themselves

(Brookfield, 2005). The same can be said for professional opportunities for educators as well. To

further support the idea of authentic engagement that encompasses the "whole person" mindset,

Palmer (2017) theorizes that, "to chart that landscape fully, three important paths must be

taken—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—and none can be ignored" (p. 5). Students all

deserve to be heard and validated so that they can engage on a deeper level supportive of

co-learning. By fostering authentic engagement through active listening and deep learning inside

and outside the classroom, meaningful relationships are formed.

Authentic engagement through student-staff partnerships is beneficial for overall

engagement and persistence in higher education. According to Tong et al., student staff

partnership

> speaks to an institutional culture that values students as participants in knowledge
> construction, as producers of knowledge, within the university learning community. This
> translates into students being active participants in their own learning in the classroom
> and engaged in all aspects of university efforts to enhance education. For many
> universities, this is a radical cultural shift from staff making decisions to benefit students
> toward a mindset where students and staff are working together as colleagues, as
> partners, as trusted collaborators with shared goals. (Tong et al., 2018, p. 24)

Institutions that implement these valuable partnerships see students and staff as stakeholders in all areas of the university culture. In addition, authentic relationships are built on touchpoints and visibility, where interactions focused on validation, respect, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and trust are key. Online learning environments must find ways to develop and encourage those valuable touchpoints in order to foster a culture where authentic engagement can be present.

Collective Ownership

Student success and engagement are deeply rooted in collective ownership within the university. Online program development is often met with reluctance from stakeholders because it emerges quickly and quietly as a directive from university leadership. As discussed in the background section, the changing higher education climate has led to an emergent need for universities to reevaluate online strategies for student success. Part of that need requires a collective agreement between all stakeholders. In this case, students, faculty, university leadership, and staff need to be willing to adjust to changes within the educational system.

Moore's (2014) study yielded some interesting results in regards to student satisfaction that differed from previous models in that asynchronous courses were shown to be as effective (or more effective) than synchronous courses. However, the research into what makes courses effective continues to divide researchers in that not all models will work in at the institutional or the course level. The study did conclude that "students must be directly engaged in the learning process" for success to occur (Moore, 2014, p. 14). Immersion into the course and connection to community (regardless of what members of the community) are key for student successs. Immersion and connection into the community create the culture of collective ownership between the learner and the university.

Palmer (2017) states, "teaching and learning are critical to our individual and collective survival and to the quality of our lives. The pace of change has us snarled in complexities, confusions, and conflicts that will diminish us, or do us in, if we do not enlarge our capacity to teach and to learn" (p. 3). Palmer's statement reinforces the idea that all stakeholders have to be able to be both teacher and learner to engage in collective partnerships in education. To that end, there is a need for student ownership. Educators provide the tools necessary to achieve their goals, but they must also take responsibility to invest in their education. In order for collective ownership to occur, educators must first accept their own individual responsibilities. Students must be willing to contribute to their own education by engaging, communicating, and building relationships with other students and faculty/staff. The university must provide a safe and effective learning environment that supports engagement, communication, and relationship building for students and stakeholders throughout. By allowing ownership and fostering a culture rooted in communication and authentic engagement, we allow for opportunities for growth and student and university success.

Communication

All educators have struggled with finding ways to communicate more effectively with students, colleagues, and other stakeholders. Communication is constantly being reimagined as technology advances, but human connection should also be considered. Too often, communicating is only done through emails, discussion postings, paper writing, and social media. While it is convenient and allows for remote working environments and asynchronous learning, we are missing the sound of hearing one's voice, facial expressions, and mannerisms that can aid in the communication process. This leads to communication breakdown with colleagues and students and emotional fatigue. In many instances, technology limits

relationships, authenticity, and community engagement that comes from traditional communication strategies. Arguably, while technology has limited human connection, it has provided increased accessibility and a practicality to learning. Engagement of students will not be achieved without communication beyond the typical confines of the asynchronous learning environments.

Communication not only promotes student success but also for increases overall satisfaction with both learning and social/emotional relationships. Hung and Chou's (2014) study suggests that more communication using discussion forums and personalized feedback leads to increased emotional satisfaction in students and in turn creates student persistence. In addition, university communication leads to increased stakeholder (employee) satisfaction. In contrast, lack of communication in both students and university stakeholders can lead to an unwillingness to cooperate or communicate further and stifle the co-learning opportunities and inclusion.

Human Centeredness

Holistic approaches to education and ultimately student success must be rooted in human centeredness. Universities have to be willing to know their students, their colleagues, themselves in order to begin to understand the "why" in individual educational goals. bell hooks (1994) states, "professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply" (p. 22). Human centeredness relies on the sharing of information and ideas while allowing personal growth and freedom of expression. Engaged pedagogy and human centeredness can also be seen in Freire's (1998) work as it relates to meeting students where they are by acknowledging their perspectives and creating safe places for them to experience growth through interaction in and out of the classroom. Freire (1998) writes,

"the experience that makes possible the 'breakthrough' is a 'collective experience' (p. 77).

Nancy Michael, a science professor at the University of Notre Dame developed a

community-based learning classroom approach that revealed vulnerability as one of the key

aspects of human centeredness in the classroom:

> Until we have an earnest and deep experience that engenders a connection with and
> compassion for those that we see as "other," we are subject to rapid, reflexive,
> emotionally balanced decision-making about the "other" group, for better or worse. I
> believe we can work to reduce this kind of rapid, reflexive decision-making in our
> students, others, and ourselves by becoming more whole humans. We become more
> whole by becoming more vulnerable and open to that "other" we don't know. And that
> "other" may very well be the students themselves, or even the parts of ourselves that we
> have been taught to be ashamed of or hide from the outside world. (Brantmeier &
> McKenna, 2020, p. 54)

Student development is accomplished when universities consider their own frame as part of the

learning experience and meet them where they are to start the learning process and relationship

building. Universities (and all stakeholders within them) have to be willing to be vulnerable with

their students to foster whole-person learning.

In addition, a sense of community is created through the human-centered approach

(Brown & Wyatt, 2010). Interaction between stakeholders also supports the importance of a

culture of community that promotes individuality and wholeness simultaneously. However, there

could be some challenges with tackling this kind of approach because of the individualized

nature of human-centered learning. The consistent modification of practice and design may lead

to burnout from stakeholders (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018). While design process considers

policies and procedures, the essence of the process of becoming and fostering a human-centered

university culture is creative and rooted in organic and holistic practice.

Storytelling

While storytelling is not a new concept, it is not generally used in education as part of student success initiatives. San Pedro and Kinloch (2017) explain that to accomplish those relationships "we listen not to extract; rather, we listen to build, develop, and share our own stories with those who have shared their stories with us. In doing so, we contextualize storying as research and knowledge production, which allows us to forward social justice, educational equity, and positive social change" (p. 378). By building relationships through empathy, storytelling, and creative practices that allow freedom of expression, we can finally begin to understand our students' needs so that we can employ practices rooted in social justice and empowerment and promote their success while building strong relationships. Astiz theorizes that storytelling provides a powerful tool for establishing cultural competence and connection inside the classroom and within the relational structure of the university.

> It has been said that while an inter subjective practice, the act of narrating a story, opens possibilities for engagement in interpretative processes and relational interactions; it also provides human beings a venue to feel, empathize, and process experiences, both their own and of others. In short, storytelling is a humanizing practice, which, if properly grounded in thought, can guide inquiry and foster critical thinking. (Astiz, 2020, p. 187)

The use of storytelling bridges the gap between empathy and understanding. For example, humans tend to be empathetic toward other humans, but we don't always understand the struggle others are facing. If we use storytelling, dialogue, and active listening and engagement, we can begin to understand one another. In addition, universities can utilize storytelling or counter story as a means of understanding multiple positionalities of individuals or groups of individuals, particularly those stories of socially and politically marginalized persons living at the intersections of identities (Berry, 2010, p. 25). Recognizing that the experiences that shape our

stories are embedded within each of our stages of development is important for critical reflection and authentic relationships.

Deep Learning and Critical Reflection

Wergin (2019) states, "deep learning requires active, mindful agency of the sort that not only reacts to, but also seeks out new ways of being–ways that encourage us to step out of our comfort zones just far enough to allow our innate curiosity to take over" (p. 38). Bringing students out of their comfort zones to explore learning as creative inquiry that fosters growth and encourages self-actualization builds a foundation of trust. Students (and faculty) that are given permission to be themselves without emphasis on policies, rules, and regulations are more engaged with the learning, teaching, and building of relationships (Cranton, 2016). The goal for online learning is to create a space where learning is viewed as an "activity that requires intentionality and action, and is best achieved when that learning is facilitated more than dictated" (Wergin, 2019, p. 19). However, transformative learning, adult learning, critical learning, and deep learning theories begin with changing and challenging traditional university structure and core ideals.

Along with the idea of critical reflection, self-development theories such as deep learning and creating communities of practices rooted in advancing social justice themes are crucial parts of the student engagement process. Allowing students and university staff to view learning as creative inquiry that fosters growth and encourages self-actualization encourages community involvement and collective ownership. The emotional impact, community engagement, and critical reflection that comes as a result of self-development and deep learning cannot be quantified, but they can be felt throughout the organization. Those pieces of unquantifiable data are still relevant and provide individuals with opportunities for collective ownership of the

change. Boske and McEnery (2010) stated, "critical reflection promotes a connective process that precedes meaningful learning centered on a change of self, and ultimately, changing ways of knowing and responding to the world" (p. 370). Reflection also supports a framework of deep learning and fosters a culture where social justice can be examined through a personal and scholarly lens. Wergin (2019) states: "Critical reflection through mindful learning makes one attentive to potential disorientation, which becomes 'constructive' when the … environment conducive to adaptive learning and the conditions required for intrinsic motivation to learn–are met" (p. 79). Students must feel safe, supported, and heard before true learning and critical reflection are accomplished.

Engaged Pedagogy and Emergent Strategy

The research surrounding university communication and holistic approaches to student persistence and completion in online/virtual institutions is also influenced by the theories and practices found in emergent strategy and engaged pedagogy. Emergent strategy provides a human-centered approach to change through being and living the change one wishes to make. The strategy focuses on "critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships" (Brown, 2017, p. 42). The change created within a university has to have a foundation built on trust, authentic engagement, and the intersectionality of collective goals. It also ties together the ideas of critical reflection and social justice as means for creating change both within the university and in the communities where students and stakeholders live, work, and serve. The work of engaged pedagogy supports diversity, equity, and inclusion practices and honors differences as humans to advance social justice.

While the process we use to evoke the change is important, the idea of emergent strategy requires us to be present emotionally and physically by working purposely toward something,

that strengthens us collectively (Brown, 2017). Quantifiable goals become less important and active engagement in learning communities and relationship building within the institutional networks begin to strengthen from within. The idea that change can happen *through* relationships, not simply because of them, is supported by both emergent strategy and engaged pedagogy. Learners, instructors, and staff need to be reflective in their space as well as create room for it in the classroom. Mutual respect and responsibility are key to learning and leading with dignity. Respect for differing perspectives and acknowledgement of limitations lead to growth and ultimately change in and out of the classrooms.

Universities and students need not be ashamed of their limitations as educators and learners instead limitations can be used as a building block for authentic engagement and growth. Engaged pedagogy coupled with self-actualization allows universities to be more transparent with students and open up more opportunities for growth to educators. The culture in the classroom should be a safe place where students have the freedom to grow and educators can create engagement opportunities based on individuality of the students they serve. According to Dixon (2016), both pedagogy and actual learning designs must be shifted to foster student engagement and ultimately student success in the online learning environments. Dickson theorized that a shift from individualistic to interactive learning "where students are metacognitive and motivationally and behaviorally active participants in their own learning" is needed to create a collaborative culture that reinforces discussion engagement from both students and faculty (Dickson, 2016, p. 349). Further, co-construction of knowledge is important for optimal engagement.

Student Support and University Training

Nontraditional learners like traditional on-ground learners need support to persist. In a 2017 study conducted by Calhoun, Green and Burke, they found that there was a lack in professional development, university buy-in, and technology training in online (technology-based) learning environments that could hinder student success. They theorized that administrative training could lead to shared experiences and the creation of communities of practice focused on addressing student support needed for increased persistence/retention. The sharing of knowledge between learners, instructors, and administrative staff is critical for long-term strategies of student empowerment and, in turn, persistence and completion (Calhoun et al., 2017).

Summary

hooks (1994) states, "I believed that personal success was intimately linked with self-actualization. My passion for this quest led me to interrogate constantly the mind/body split that was so often taken to be a given" (p. 18). hooks' quote is powerful for any educational practitioner who is embarking on their journey of promoting student empowerment, engagement, and success or advancing social justice through teaching and learning. This pedagogical thinking allows practitioners to become innovators who break down the barriers of the past and look toward a future rooted in social justice and a community of learners who feel "heard." Where there is mutual respect and responsibility, leading and learning progress is present. Interaction among stakeholders also supports the importance of social justice action research that promotes individuality and wholeness simultaneously. Universities must be the change they want to see and examine their own strengths and weaknesses before they can teach through leading and lead through teaching. Through these methods of engagement and success students and staff become

partners in their success, and universities become gateways for meaningful relationship building opportunities. In addition, the university and the students they serve must be willing to become both the teacher and learner. The students become the teacher when given opportunities for engagement and leadership within the university system. Universities become the students when they listen and heed to the students' need and put aside any internal divisions. Though "traditional academic institutions are an indispensable cornerstone of society and culture because the college experience is transformative for so many people," they must be able to change to meet the ever-changing student climate (Beaudoin, 2016, p. 27). Universities that engage in an educative culture that supports the students they serve in order to transform internal and external cultural needs foster trust and student success.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH DESIGN

The literature review revealed the emphasis placed on authentic engagement, communication, collective ownership, and human centeredness as gateways for student success in online learning environments. In order to fully explore the impact of those areas, a qualitative research approach was selected to capture the voice and nuances of the students participating in the study. This study seeks to interpret impact that university relationships have on overall student engagement and persistence, a phenomenon that cannot be quantified but rather is expressed through meaning (i.e., stories or narrative). Additionally, qualitative methods allow the voices of the participants to be heard, which supports storytelling as powerful connection between research and change. Qualitative analysis allows the researcher to use sense-making principles to critically reflect, authentically engage, and holistically evaluate the meanings expressed in research process.

Theoretical Framework

Finding the Right Fit

This study required a methodology and theoretical framework that allowed a qualitative approach to research that respected the relationships, authenticity, and critical reflection of university culture and evolving praxis of interpretations. While grounded theory and phenomenological research were initially considered as an appropriate design because of the element of symbolic interactionism placed within those methodologies, the centrality of my position within the work required a lens that allowed for consideration of researcher assumptions (Charon, 2007). The very essence of this work involves relational interpretations, engaged pedagogy, and authentic engagement that required me to engage in the research as participant and researcher (Adom et al., 2016). Further research into methodology and frameworks that

allowed for "intentionality of purpose" and researcher participation revealed action research (AR) and participatory action research (PAR) as possibilities for a collaborative design. However, despite the initial researcher excitement of using AR or PAR as a method of research, this type of research is so immersive that lines can easily be crossed and data can be compromised.

According to Krauss (2005), a paradigm is a "basic belief system or world view that guides the investigation" (p. 759). Because higher education is full of "multiple realities" and several viewpoints, the paradigm and framework of the study had to leave room for co-construction of knowledge (Krauss, 2005, p. 750). The methods used must be able to translate multiple meanings and experiences to form the scaffolding of the study. With those things in mind, "post-positivism" was also considered, as it allows interaction with research and a practitioner-based approach (Taylor & Medina, 2011). In addition, there were similarities in the "interpretive paradigm" that would be useful because of the researchers' close interaction and practice with students. Both frameworks provided little space for authenticity and interaction without the ability to become co-researcher.

Constructivism

Social construction of knowledge is at the forefront of student engagement. A deeper look into constructivist theory and philosophical paradigm revealed that foundation is built on social and cultural influences (Bruner, 1996). In addition, researchers using this framework can begin with assumptions or generalizations about the research and then "generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meanings" (Creswell, 2003, p. 9). Creating space within the research for meanings and experiences of the researcher supports a culture where there is complete immersion into the scholar-practitioner practice.

> The researcher constructs meanings from the phenomena under study through his own experiences and that of the participants in the study. The researcher evaluates what is said to ascertain the real facts. In his quest to find the true state of the situation under study, he sometimes engages in the activities as they are carried out by residents in the natural settings so that he experiences it himself or see others experiencing it. (Adom et al., 2016, p. 5)

This knowledge is important due to my position within the institution and relationship to the students and the work itself. Heron and Reason (2001) suggest that "good research is research conducted with people rather than on people" (p. 179), but "standard review processes do not easily recognize such an approach" (Lake & Wendland, 2018, p. 21). I want to respect the voices and stories of my students while considering my own theories and lived experiences as nontraditional students conducting this research in fulfillment of the doctoral program.

Constructivist thought also seeks to understand social influences on learning therefore the interpretations can be both subjective and objective. However, the interpretations can reveal context into relationships in online learning environments through analyzing the patterns of data. Building on the work of John Dewey and Jean Piaget, Bruner's constructivist theory builds off of the principles that learning and, in turn, engagement in the learning are (a) contextual, (b) personal, (c) a social activity, (d) an active process, (e) constructed (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1997; Freire, 1998). Moreover, the focus on learning as a social activity and as motivation asserts that connection and relationships are important and provide a strong foundation on which universities can build their student success practices.

Methodology

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry within the qualitative data is a methodology utilizing, reflection, authenticity, and critical reflection to allow for a robust and interpretive design that can allow researchers and participants to co-construct theories for change (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). As

discussed in the literature review, storytelling is an important part of student engagement. Narrative inquiry relies on storytelling to provide a foundation for understanding and qualitative research.

Storying or storytelling is central to the narrative inquiry methodology. Surrounding storytelling are a knowledge paradigm, methodology, quality criteria, and reflexivity to form a basis of the logical assumption focused on interpreting the stories of participants and the resulting extracted data. Looking at the knowledge paradigm first, narrative inquiry and with a focus on storytelling stems from two distinct areas of analysis:

> (1) the interpretative paradigm, within constructivism, is the individual perspective on how people see the world (ontology). Knowledge is obtained by participating subjectively in meaning-making (epistemology); and (2) the critical paradigm, within social constructionism, is the philosophical assumption that meaning is already in the world (ontology). Knowledge is produced by social, political, economic, and cultural values crystallized over time (epistemology). In the critical paradigm, the social world is mediated by power relations in a constructed lived experience amidst social and historical contexts, which, in turn, shape social reality. (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022, p. 1)

As discussed in the theoretical framework, constructivism most fits the parameters of this study. However, within narrative inquiry the critical paradigm of social constructivism (under the broader scope of constructivism) aligns with the epistemology and ontology of the study itself because of the social structure and cultural influences discovered within narrative inquiry research design.

Reflexivity as part of the circular structure represents justification of the work "personally, practically and socially" (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022, p. 3; Clandinin et al., 2007). This personal connection to the work provides the background for the research and as a doctoral student the foundation of the dissertation study. It establishes the value and belief system one brings to the practice while identifying "both their interpretations and participants' stories as

socially situated embedded in reflexivity" (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022, p. 3). Finally, quality

criteria within the confines of qualitative narrative inquiry must be established to provide validity

to the research. According to Pino Gavidia and Adu (2022), credibility, transferability,

dependability, and confirmability are captured as part of the research process to ensure a viable

resulting theory and/or subsequent modeling.

Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

The four dimensions criteria in qualitative research establish trustworthiness of the data.

This study will employ all four dimensions within the framework by engaging participants as co-

researchers and grounding the research in applicable data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To

establish credibility, transcripts were created for all participant interviews. In addition,

participants were given the opportunity to read their individual stories to confirm the capturing of

correct interpretation. By using literature supporting the research and a social constructivist

framework that supports numerous contextual methodologies, transferability can be established

in this study. The research is based on lived experiences, professional practice over a 14-year

time period, and credibility from participants, which displays the dependability of the findings

presented in the proceeding chapters. While this study provides individualistic findings based on

one university, it can be confirmed through university institutional data, which supports the

confirmability of the overall research. In Chapter IV quantitative data will also be presented to

further support the qualitative findings and assumptions.

Population and Participants

The population of the study consisted of students enrolled in or graduated from

bachelor's degree completion programs at one non-profit university. After IRB approval

(Appendix A), the researcher first identified a set of participants who would qualify for the study

based on their enrollment date. In order to conduct timely research students were selected via a semi-purposive sampling that identified students who were enrolled at The University within the last three years. The enrollment date ensured that contacted students would have participated in updated curriculum that began in the Fall of 2019 and been enrolled prior to or during the COVID-19 pandemic that begin in the Winter/Spring of 2020. The date qualifiers of semi-purposive sampling began Fall 2019 and ended in the Spring 2022 to ensure that students had at least one full semester of study. After the initial enrollment date qualifier was applied, a call for volunteer participants was sent via email to 210 alumni and current students representing various degree programs and demographics. The email led students who wished to participate to a Google form that represented qualifying parameters.

Procedures and Data Collection

As referenced in Chapters I and III data collection for this study began by first identifying the research parameters. The 210 students in the sampling were either currently enrolled, on leave, withdrawn, or had completed their bachelor's program. All 210 students identified were sent an initial email (Appendix D) with a qualifying questionnaire (Appendix C). From that pool of students, 50 replied with interest in participating, which yielded an approximately 24% return rate. Of those 50 participants, 39 were eligible for the study (78%). The qualifying questionnaire identified 11 participants not qualified for the study parameters due to age (5), enrollment (1), course participation (4), and advising (1).

The researcher had an initial goal of at least 10 participants, however 20 were asked to participate in interviews, and 19 were selected as alternates. To ensure the quality, credibility, and validity of the study the participants that were chosen to be interviewed, the following criteria were applied to selection:

- at least one student from each major offered (if available in the sampling);

- equal representation of gender;

- at least one student from each age range (35–70);

- representation from current, withdrawn, completed, and on-leave students (if available in the sampling);

- geographic presentation variance;

- cultural diversity (if identified and/or provided in the sampling).

The request for interviews (Appendix D) were sent to 20 participants. All 20 participants scheduled interviews based on their availability and schedules via a meeting scheduling software (youcanbook.me). Interviews were conducted beginning in November 2022 through February 2023 through live interviews on the Zoom platform. (Note: Two interviews had to be done a second time due to a fire that destroyed the external encrypted hard drive). To further protect the integrity of the study the same questions were asked of each participant, and follow-up questions were only asked if further information or clarity was required to understand the participants' meaning. Transcription was completed by early March 2023, and thematic analysis began immediately.

Student Success Model Considerations

As discussed in Chapters I and II, there are few studies that specifically address student success models and a theoretical framework that truly represents the student journey in online learning environments in the pandemic era. Data is limited and looped into bigger university studies that follow traditional learning environments. While Tinto (1975, 1997) and Kember (1989) provide a framework for student success and persistence, the models do not address current trends or climate in a post-pandemic online higher education culture. A study conducted

by Ashar and Skenes (1993) analyzed Tinto's student departure model to determine if it could be applied to nontraditional students. While the online learning environment was just in its infancy when the study was conducted, nontraditional students were the focus and therefore applicable to this study and reimagined student success models. Ashar and Skenes (1993) found that Tinto's (1975) departure model could be applicable to the nontraditional student in one area: social integration. The co-construction of learning through relationship building (social interaction) was an indicator of persistence. Further, they found "that learning needs, either academic or career, might be strong enough to attract students to educational programs but not sufficient to maintain them in these programs" (Ashar & Skenes, 1993, p. 97). Ultimately the Ashar and Skenes (1993), found that the learning took place in the social spaces. Their study supports the methods and theories presented in this research in that engagement (social) and authenticity (emotional) foster a culture of co-learning needed for students' success.

To that end, social constructivism was chosen as the framework so that student storying is at the forefront. Loren Brown's (2014) work with constructivism in online learning communities further supports the notion that online learning can be equivalent to face-to-face learning if there is emphasis placed on a co-construction of knowledge and co-learning. There must be a shift away from the isolationist model that was once used by universities to create online learning within existing institutional structures. In order to foster an engaging online constructivist learning environment teacher-centered models need to transcend into a student-centered model (Brown, 2014). Brown further suggests that learning communities are necessary for successful constructivist learning:

> The evidence shows that a learning community must be present in order for satisfactory learning to occur, and the teacher and other students play a fundamental role in creating this community for each student who enters this community. Knowing the key elements that comprise the successful online learning community will enable teachers who choose

to teach in distance learning venues to adopt many of the successful strategies for
themselves. Moreover, as students understand the requirements necessary for learning
success in the distance venue, such as taking an active role in their own learning,
willingness to collaborate, and providing a genuine sense of caring and transparency
within the classroom, students will find that the constructivist approach that works for
teachers will also work for themselves in constructing and maintaining a successful
online learning communities. (Brown, 2014, p. 5)

Sharma (2014) also found that active cognitive interaction within online environments through

learner-centered pedagogies supported not only the constructivist philosophy but also a shift for

learners to engage in critical exploration of their prior knowledge and experiences.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms are used throughout the research process. All named university faculty, staff, administration, and institutional identifiers also have pseudonyms. The institution will be referred to as "The University" in the proceeding sections.

Participant Demographics

The researcher chose to interview 20 students from a pool of 39 eligible with 19 serving as alternates. To ensure quality of the date, from the participants' demographics were considered in their selection. Table 4.1 displays the demographics of the participant population. The following demographics are represented in relation to the study criteria discussed in "Procedures and Data Collection" of Chapter III:

a. 7 of the 11 majors were represented.

b. 11 of the participants identified as female, and 9 identified as male.

c. Age representations: 35–39: 4 participants, 40–49: 9 participants, 50–59: 2 participants, 60–69: 4 participants, 70–79: 1 participant.

d. 11 current students, 0 withdrawn students, 1 on leave student, 9 completed/graduated students.

e. 3 students reside in Ohio, 8 reside in California, 3 in Washington, 1 in Florida, 1 in Indiana, 1 in Missouri, 1 in Colorado, 1 in West Virginia, and 1 in Alaska (13 West, 6 Midwest, 2 South, 0 Northeast).

f. The following ethnicities were represented in the study (not all participants self-identified):

- White alone, non-Hispanic,

- Black or African American alone, non-Hispanic

- American Indian and Alaska Native alone, non-Hispanic

- Asian alone, non-Hispanic

- Multiracial, non-Hispanic

Table 4.1

Demographics and Geographical Data of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Major/Field of Study	Age	Gender	Residence
La'Nay	BA Human Service Administration	35	Female	Ohio
Lynn	BA Liberal Arts (Creative Writing and Literature)	37	Female	California
Katerina	BA Human Development	37	Female	California
Forest	BA Human Development	41	Male	Washington
Jerry	BS Applied Technology and Business Leadership	41	Male	Washington
Ty	BA Management	41	Male	Florida
Simone	BA Liberal Arts (Individualized Studies)	44	Female	Ohio
Mike	BA Management	45	Male	Indiana
Toby	BA Management	45	Female	Missouri
Rochelle	BA Human Development	46	Female	Colorado
Marty	BA Liberal Arts (Conflict Resolution)	47	Male	California
Pam	BA Liberal Arts (Creative Writing and Literature)	52	Female	Ohio
Aaron	BA Management	54	Male	Washington
Paul	BA Human Development	61	Male	West Virginia
Cinn	BA Liberal Arts (Individualized Studies)	62	Female	California
Harold	BA Liberal Arts (Humanities)	64	Male	California
Jackson	BA Liberal Arts (Creative Writing and Literature)	66	Male	California
Bonita	BA Liberal Arts (Creative Writing and Literature)	70	Female	California
Sabine	BA Human Development	46	Female	Alaska
Monique	BA Human Development	39	Female	California

Honoring the Student Story

La'Nay's Story

La'Nay decided to return to school as a mother of four children, working one full-time job, and two part-time jobs to support her family. She needed a to find a university that was "subjective and convenient for her lifestyle," one that would work around her overflowing schedule. Before deciding on The University, she had done copious amounts of research before filling out the information request online. A day later a long conversation with an admissions representative solidified her decision. "The [admissions representative] told me that I would be in a smaller classroom, and that you will be able to communicate openly with professors and classmates. It was a turning point, and I was like, yeah, this is going to be a good fit for me." The conversation went into specific details about her goals, transfer credits, and fears about returning to school with conflicting priorities. For La'Nay the emphasis on communication, social justice, and assurance from the admissions representative allowed her to make her decision confidently and without fear.

At her previous institutions La'Nay felt like she was given a "constant runaround" when she needed assistance. The University provided her the opportunity to focus her time on her education rather than navigating the institutional hierarchy to get the services she needed to be successful. "I never felt like that at [The University]. If I made a phone call, I talked to someone. If I sent the email, it was responded to." It was important for La'Nay to have a support system at The University and a commitment to the values she was passionate about. The feeling of community and support was present throughout her time, and she felt that "having a [university] community that has your back, and the right support inside and outside the classroom is key."

Human centeredness and authenticity were common themes found throughout La'Nay's interview. The transformative nature of her program coupled with the relationships she formed was important for her because she was able to feel empowered with the support of her peers and those who had walked with her on the journey at The University.

> We are able to change the trajectory of our lives and in our kids' lives for better, having a place where you can go to school and know you're going to be successful is everything. We transform that into knowledge and into success, not only in my career, but in my life. I can give this to the next generation, including my own kids who are on their way to college.

Although online learning is sometimes lonely, La'Nay felt as though she was never alone. She joined study groups, reached out to other students, and had an academic advisor that she was able to connect with. "I think because of the structure of the classes and the dynamic of [The University], I was able to form those type of authentic bonds with people." From the first moment she connected with The University she was treated with authenticity and encouraged by the commitment to student success the faculty and staff displayed.

Her experience at The University inspired her to continue her education where she will graduate in the Spring of 2023 with a master's degree. The University was her first choice for her master's program but didn't offer her specialty, but she was confident in her abilities and felt empowered to keep going. The success she had in her bachelor's program provided her with a strong foundation for learning. "Outside of the classroom and inside of the classroom. I had a platform and somebody to talk to. I had resources. There is a community formed there, and it is integral to everybody's success. They wanted everybody to succeed, and I think everyone can be successful here with that true support."

Lynn's Story

Lynn had always dreamed of being a writer and had taken classes thinking she was making progress toward a creative writing degree when she discovered her credits from an extension of a large public institution were not giving her momentum toward her goals. Finding an institution that fit with her self-described "nonacademic" background and one that would ameliorate her progress was important to her. "I had been working so hard and so long at [The Extension], and I thought all those classes were going to count for nothing. [The University] was willing to take all of my credits, which were kind of hodgepodge." Discovering that The University would not only take her credits but help her reach her goals coupled with the emphasis The University placed on "social and environmental justice" helped finalize her decision. "Those components were really attractive to me, it just seemed really woke, and I was going be able to go in there and had made some progress towards the bachelor's degree at [The Extension], whereas if I went anywhere else, I would have nothing toward the bachelor's degree."

Lynn had difficulty navigating the traditional college environment, so online made sense for her. She viewed her experience with mental illness coupled with a disability as confirmation that she may not succeed in any degree program, but The University support system she created started to break down her doubts. A mother of a small child, Lynn wanted the flexibility to take classes and spend time with her family while working toward something greater. Her first advising meeting with Kay made her feel comfortable due to the emphasis placed on really achieving her goals and motivation. "I remember having conversations about my goals and [Kay] just really encouraging me. She explained that it was an integrated curriculum, that the classes weren't going to be traditional, and that I would be able to write and achieve my goals."

Lynn had enrolled just prior to the pandemic began, and after one semester she had to take a leave of absence, which could have derailed her path. She found herself homeschooling her son and adjusting to the demands of teaching while navigating her own education. Despite the data that many nontraditional students do not return to school after a leave, Lynn felt supported enough to return after one semester. She recalls the transition back to school after the leave:

> I took a leave of absence. Then, when the time came to come back to school, I came back, and I did what I needed to do. For some reason, because of that leave, they picked me to go on this panel and talk about that, and how I got through it. I just felt I was in the right place. [The University] is the right place for me, because not only did they let me take this leave of absence, they were totally supportive. They picked me to go on a panel to talk to the rest of the school. I spoke publicly about my disability. And [Kay] was the ask [her] anything kind of person. And then like I felt like I could email [her] at any time and [she] remembered me. Whenever I had a question. I could email or I could book an appointment at any time. Everyone was so supportive.

The support in the classroom from her professors and out of the classroom by her advisor and financial aid staff contributed to her success. She credits receiving additional grants due to COVID and a personal authentic connection with her ultimate success in the program. Everyone was accessible and ready to assist her with anything she needed.

The University helped Lynn overcome her own fears of not being academic enough to earn a bachelor's degree. "When I used to go to community college in my early twenties, I actually remember being on my way to school and throwing up all over myself because I just couldn't handle the stress of going to school." Encouragement from her professors, advisors, and peers inspired Lynn to start a writing group with two other students that she is still participating in after her graduation. They still meet weekly to talk about life and their work. Those connections have allowed her to meet other writers in her home state of California and also obtain a writing mentor who is helping her launch her writing career further. Lynn and the other

writing group participants all decided to pursue an MFA program at The University, and she

hopes to continue even further. "I was just inspired by [Kay] who was in a doctoral program. I

hope I can do something teaching wise. In the meantime. I'm know I'm going to go even higher

than the MFA."

The collective efforts of the university staff allowed for a seamless educational

experience for Lynn that inspired her to embrace her disability because she was accepted into a

culture of trust and authenticity from the moment she enrolled.

> I always say this, but I'm not an academic but I did very well at [The University]. What
> [The University] did for me was made it possible for me to get a college education
> despite my mental health issues. It's not because it's less of a program, or it's easier or
> anything like that. I was a square peg in a round hole. They were able to adapt the
> education to fit me. They're willing to do that. Whereas traditional education, they don't
> do that.

Lynn noted that often times institutions use a one-size-fits all approach to student

services and success, but The University tailored the education to fit her needs and goals. They

were always willing to work with her unique needs and understood the importance of embracing

individualities in students. The culture in and out of the classroom created opportunities for

personal and professional growth. The adaptability of the programming and the relational

structure are a gateway to, according to Lynn, "the future of education, and where we need to be

going if we're going to learn to educate the future generations." She credits The University with

being able to earn her degree "because this is the only institution that's worked for me so far."

Katerina's Story

Katerina came to The University after several of her peers had completed on-campus

programs or who had seen psychologists that had graduated from the Clinical Psychology

program. Initially she wanted to be on campus, but she realized that being a mom with a

three-year-old would not allow her to be in classes away from home several days a week. "The

flexibility of being at home and doing work asynchronously just fit best for my schedule, and then COVID happened, so it was almost like it was just like it was meant to be that way." She had entered the program just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic that shut down the world. The online program allowed her learning to progress with minimal disruption to her routines. "I've always wanted to be an on-campus person, but I just knew that for me, and moving forward in my journey of education, it just was not feasible during the pandemic especially."

During her first meeting with Kay, she was surprised to learn that the conversation was not just about academics but about her future goals. Kay wanted to know her "why" and what had inspired her to become a therapist. "She wanted to know my passions and purpose and what has persuaded you, or what drives you to want to get into this field or profession." It was comforting that her education wasn't reduced to just a number, they wanted to know her as a person. Her motivations for obtaining her degree were personal. As a child, Katerina saw therapists who weren't comforting, and only rarely did she find someone she could relate to and have a real connection with who fostered trust. Her path to a Clinical Psychology degree with a focus on marriage and family therapy stemmed from her own experiences as a child.

> For me it was just like, this path is what I want to do. I want to work with youth in particular, a lot of my journey of was full of adversity. It had a lot to do with my youth, and it very much affected my growth into adulthood. I feel like, if we can get help as early as possible, we can have stability as adults.

A few semesters into the Human Development program at The University, she found herself being a medical power of attorney for her mother who had neurological issues. Communication and engagement with her advisors and professors became critical for her to continue. She was not only helping care for her mother, who lived an hour away, but she was doing research into the diagnosis, all while caring for her child and attending school full-time.

> I was able to reach out to my instructors and advisor, and they were so very supportive. I think a lot of it has to do with maintaining open communication between student and instructor. For me that was always very vital. So, I was highly communicative, and I think because of that, there was a really clear understanding that I am still so dedicated to the program, but I've got so much going on outside of the program. And so, there was a sense of not just flexibility, but support.

Her advisor and professors understood that not only was her family important, but Katerina needed support beyond the traditional classroom environment. Their understanding coupled with Katerina's dedication allowed her to focus on her family without fear of failure in the program.

Katerina recalls only one instance where she didn't feel heard or supported while at The University. A professor in one of her classes had poor communication with the class and dismissed Katerina's request for flexibility while caring for her mother. "Ninety-nine percent of my experience was the same, except for the professor who wasn't a good communicator. I always got great feedback. I always had my questions answered and anything I needed in terms of additional resources." Despite her experience with professor, Katerina was supported by her advisor who had given her advice on handling the issues in the classroom and continued to check in until the class ended. "[Kay] was super integral as my advisor getting me into my classes, making sure that I was taking the correct classes that I need to get. I remember meeting with [her] literally every term, every semester, making sure that I was on track." Her relationships with Kay and her other professors allowed her to feel heard and not "slip through the cracks" so that she could move into a master's program as efficiently as possible.

At the close of the interview Katerina noted an important part of her journey that could hopefully inspire and help other students just starting on a path to achieving their own goals:

> There were some really deep, deep moods that I experienced, and at the time I felt like I just didn't know who I was, where I was going, or what I was doing. One thing I always relied on was education. School for so long to me was almost a personal therapeutic journey, because I was able to learn so much about how we develop. Always continuing to pursue education, was so critical in my understanding of my own development. I felt

like growing up it was a little rocky for me, so what I did was I took my personal life experience, and I wanted to grow with the knowledge and understanding gained from my education and then take that into my personal growth, and then apply it into service for others.

Part of her growth as a student she contributes to The University because she felt empowered by the support she received along the way. Like Katerina, many students use education as an outlet to escape and grow for themselves and for others.

Forest's Story

Forest had been considering The University for eight years before he applied and was accepted. He had been told about the program by his therapist who was an alum. However, he had two young children and lived over two hours away from the nearest physical campus. His father had worked for a local community college, and during the pandemic he had enlisted Forest to help him learn the technology required to move all teaching online. Once he discovered The University's online program during the pandemic all of details started to come together. "My dad was a 74-year-old man at the time, had to learn the entire Canvas online program, and he didn't know how to send an email. I learned how to use it really well and gave him a full tutorial. And so, then I was really on fire about the online environment. A lot of little elements just kind of clicked into place for me." Despite the pandemic, conflicting priorities of home and family and distance from a campus, he was able to find a program that could help him realize his goals.

After he applied and was accepted, Forest met with both admissions and advising staff so that he could begin to formulate a plan. At 40 years old he had been a designer for 20 years, but he had always dreamed of becoming a therapist. His design job did not fulfill him like the prospect of helping others through counseling did. The University focused on really getting to know him and the goals and motivation he had for returning to school.

It's always been a dream, the human connection has always been the best part of any career I've ever been in. So, my motivation was always helping people. The focus that that the initial people I talked to at [The University] was about social justice, helping people, and being a champion for the people and empowerment.

The emphasis on empowerment of the students and social justice initiatives allowed Forest a platform for exploring his goals.

Feedback and connection with his professors and community were important to Forest. He found the authenticity and human centeredness of the program to be not only motivating but validating. "Custom feedback was really important to me. I mean I haven't written an essay since I was 17 years old. And here's an instructor, you know, giving me direct feedback saying really it was emotional what I was writing about and saying that the work is exemplary. And it really it was a huge confidence boost." Online programming had the reputation of viewing students as "invisible," but for Forest he felt anything but invisible. He felt seen and heard by his instructors and his advisors despite being in an asynchronous environment. "It was still really greatly appreciated when I could tell that I was seen and heard. The student was seen for what they were trying to say, and I was getting constructive criticism on how to improve."

Early in his program his partner had a baby, and he had to take a short leave to be with his partner and his growing family. The staff, he said, were "so understanding and made the process of leaving and coming back so smooth." The University allowed him the flexibility to take a leave without derailing his progress. They built the leave into his original degree plan so that he could focus on taking care of his family. "The understanding around the sabbatical made all the difference in the world, because there was big healing. There were birth complications. There were traumas and having that four plus months off without having to worry at all about school, or get any pressure or worries from anybody there. That was really that was amazing to have that little break with my family."

Despite having a wonderful experience with The University, Forest did have a difficult experience with grading and clear expectations. The University used a narrative evaluation system that didn't focus on letter grades, however, letter grades and percentages were assigned to the online program students. Coming from a traditional education background where enormous emphasis is placed on grades, Forest experienced some tension when a grade lower than he expected was issued.

> Grades are attached to my soul, and if I get a bad grade, it hurts. There was one time where a syllabus was not super-duper crystal clear about the expectations, and I missed the mark. But the process of resolving that was good. I contacted the teacher in question, just to hash it out, and I learned that I missed the meaning of the syllabus and points weren't adjusted. Nothing came of it, except for that I learned to more closely review syllabus before class work. Even if something is not going to go my way. I really appreciate the process of conflict with resolution being had.

Through that experience Forest learned that The University was willing to engage in productive discourse and conflict resolution with the students they served. He felt safe enough to bring up his concerns to the faculty and directors. Though resolution did not come in the form of an adjusted grade, he viewed it as a learning experience that would help in future classes.

Forest's overall experience inspired him to keep going. He is now attending one of The University's master's program with the urging from his advisor Kay and his favorite professor-turned-mentor John. He credits the personalized and authentic nature of the services he received with igniting his passions further. Though he was passionate about helping people and becoming a counselor someday, the goal for him seemed insurmountable until he entered The University. "It seemed unattainable, and it seemed too hard to reach. [The University] really made that feel accessible. It empowered me to believe even though you know I was just a designer and a business person, I could do it, I could achieve my dream."

Jerry's Story

Six months into the pandemic, Jerry wanted to make a change. Interested primarily in art and design, he searched for options that would fit into his schedule and his goal of using his creative talents full-time. While The University's online program didn't have a design program, he knew that the portfolio he had been building was what mattered, not the degree itself. "Many of the jobs are based on portfolio, so I didn't feel that I needed to go and get a degree in graphic design or some kind of art degree when that's not important." A friend who was a current student told him about The University and the flexibility and the human-centered approach to learning. Having been in the tech arena and food service industry for 23 years, Jerry needed someplace that could work around his late-night schedule while allowing him to work in a project-based learning environment.

After enrolling he was diagnosed with ADHD, which allowed him to identify how to learn more effectively. The online program allowed him freedom to learn in his own space and time while adjusting to his diagnosis. From the first course, Jerry felt comfortable in the online space without a considerable adjustment period because the emphasis was placed on goals and holistic approach to education. "The holistic approach to education at [The University] is different than most other institutions…The communication that I've had with most of the staff and most of the faculty has been fantastic. And when I've asked for help or anything, it was met with empathy, compassion, and understanding."

Over a year into his program Jerry's mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and he became a caretaker for her. With the pandemic, caring for his mother, working, and mandatory evacuations with fire, Jerry experienced emotional fatigue from his conflicting priorities. His therapist told him he needed to ask for help and "to assemble a team, because you can't do this

all by yourself." Jerry had difficultly asking for help but knew that he needed a support system to be able to keep going. When he reached out to his advisor Kay and his faculty members, they told him to take care of himself first. He was given grace freely without going into details and was able to communicate his needs without fear.

> My start with the program was aligned with these massive amounts of changes in the last two or three years. If I were to go to a traditional school, I wouldn't have continued just because of the turn and burn mentality that they have there. I mean, it's not to say that they don't care, but I don't think other institutions really are set up to care, you know. I think it really does come down to the individual, where I feel like what's been built within [The University].

The relational structure focused on authenticity and the human-centered approach encouraged Jerry to keep working toward his goals and that they would be there to support him.

A self-described life-long learner, Jerry wanted to stay in his program despite the challenges he faced. He continued his program at a slower pace and was encouraged by the support that he received in the form of understanding and The University's approach to the educational journey as a collective culture.

> I get a feeling the culture at [The University], with the administration, staff and with the faculty that understanding is a little bit more built in, you know. And without that kind of understanding, cultural acceptance of the journey, and without that asynchronous curriculum and class taking, there is just no way, I mean, there's just no way, if I didn't have those things in place, I wouldn't be finishing my degree.

Having a support system behind him, Jerry is finishing up his degree and plans to continue his education in a user experience design program in the future. He is still caring for his mother, which may delay his education, but he is not giving up on his lifelong learner mentality because he feels it is important for change and having collective ownership in society. "I think that that if people were to approach education as a lifelong journey, then I think a lot of the issues that we have in our society today would be addressed. If we are curious we can keep growing and changing."

Ty's Story

Having worked in higher education most of his career, Ty wanted a university that stood for something and focused on students rather than the bottom line. "I chose [The University] based on its roots. The school focused on social, economic, and environmental justice. Focusing on people, planet, and purpose all align with my beliefs, pushing not a narrative or an agenda, but pushing humanity." Ty also had a family and a career, which meant he needed flexibility. His current role at a university had given him a timeline to obtain his bachelor's degree so that he could continue his employment and one day advance. After discussing his goals with his advisor Kay, the seemingly long and unattainable task of obtaining his degree not only became attainable but changed his perspective on the educational experience.

> [Kay] definitely gave me a fast track in regard to how to complete the program in an efficient manner, but also, more importantly, she really pointed out that the goal was to not just complete the degree to complete it, but to really get something out of it. Not just have a degree on the mantle, but to really learn from it, comprehend something and utilize it. So that's what really motivated me to not just get a degree, but to really find purpose.

The idea of purpose for the greater good inspired Ty to approach his education differently. He knew that he had a tight timeline but decided he needed to work toward something greater that could inspire the students he served and his own children.

In the Fall of 2022 Hurricane Ian damaged Ty's home and knocked out power, internet, and many other services for weeks. He reached out to his advisor and faculty members for support and was met with compassion and understanding that went above and beyond what Ty expected.

> I live off of one of the largest lakes in Florida, and so my home was damaged significantly. I reached out about my assignments, and professors were very reasonable and accommodating. However, I also had a professor send me a thermal imaging device, which is a moisture detector, because I couldn't find it anywhere else. It was a lifesaver helping me out with that, so that was awesome.

The act of kindness made Ty feel truly heard because he had a need that had nothing to do with his education. According to Ty, the professor mailed it knowing it would help him recover from the damage and keep his family safe. He was able to resume his studies successfully with a renewed sense of passion, inspired by the true kindness and community he had found within The University.

Though his bachelor's will be in management Ty, is planning on going into an individualized master's program studying antiracist education. He felt as though he was able to begin to tell his own story without fear in his coursework, and he wants to be the voice for other students by allowing them space to tell their own stories without fear. He has learned the importance of learning and authentic engagement through the sharing of stories both through his own education and the students he is in contact with. "I'm a first-generation college student, I grew up in the inner-city Chicago seeing what people see on the news. But the growing up in the city of during the crack epidemic and I began to understand how education can really take you out of certain environments and just change your world." Ty feels that education is the key to changing and creating opportunities to grow as a human being. In addition to growing, Ty remarked that education can provide safety, security and be a saving grace to students like him and many others. "This has been a beautiful journey. It's seeing other people change their lives, students have said, 'you know education didn't just change their life, it saved their life, and that is impactful because it's true for me too."

Simone's Story

Legally blind, Simone needed an option for learning that would not require her to commute to a physical campus. In addition, she was the caregiver for both of her parents, which required her to be available to them. "At the time I enrolled at [The University] I was caring for

both my mother and my father. My mother was disabled, and she passed away last year, and now it's just my dad who has dementia, so he is a full-time job. So, attending in an in-person setting would have been really challenging." Online learning provided her the opportunity to learn anytime, anywhere. Her mother was a university professor and had instilled in her a passion for learning that went beyond the traditional classroom. The University treated Simone as if she was more than just a number and promised "real learning."

Having experienced two other institutions prior to coming to The University, Simone felt as though they deadened her love of learning because they were more focused on the career aspect of education. While she wanted to have a career, she wanted to do something that she was passionate about. Her goal was "intellectual expansion" so that she could eventually teach at a college or university. An artist and writer, Simone craves the opportunity to expand her knowledge and allowed her to have control over what she was learning. She chose an individualized bachelor's program that allowed her to handpick the courses in her major while working closely with her advisors, Kay and program chair, Dr. Connor. The major gave her opportunities to authentically engage with her advisors and offered a human-centered "whole person" educational experience.

The whole-person education she received led to real relationships that extended beyond the classroom. One of her favorite professors encouraged her to display her photos for International Day for Persons with Disabilities and showed up to one of her gallery shows even though he lived several states away. Her professor, disability support person, and advisor's encouragement of her creativity and advocacy for persons with disabilities continue to inspire her to express herself through her art, writing, and even being a panelist in university-wide conversations.

> The faculty and staff developing personal relationships with the students is so important. It's easy to just give an assignment, and you know, grade it, but actually working with the student at their current level and taking enough interest to get in their head a little bit with them, and understand the work with them, and kind of them accompanying them on their journey, your education, you know, a guide trusted who will experience your time with you, and I have several here.

After finishing her bachelor's, Simone decided to attend a paralegal certificate program to support both her and her father, however, the program didn't offer the same level of service and connection that she experienced at The University, so she returned and started an individualized master of arts program where she continues to work with all of the faculty and staff she built relationships with.

Despite having two negative experiences–one with a faculty member who was not accommodating to her disability and another when a program support person made a mistake that compromised her financial aid–she was comfortable enough to communicate her issues with Kay and her disability support person, Erin. Both issues were addressed, and changes were made that allowed her to continue to be successful. "[Erin] definitely guided me through so many experiences and issues, she's been one of my allies and like a champion, and my therapist has been Dr. Malcolm. He explains concepts in ways that I understood and encouraged me to expand outside of my comfort zone." Her goals now are to finish her master's program and maybe even one day continue her education into a doctoral program. For now, she plans on taking care of her father and enjoying the experience of learning and expanding her advocacy. "I think I'm going stay at [The University], they are stuck with me forever. I can't leave. I just can't. I can't; it'd be like abandoning my family."

Mike's Story

Mike came to The University through The Stimulus Program that was designed to transition veteran students from military to civilian life by offering them educational resources as

well as connections with businesses for future employment opportunities. The Stimulus Program partnered with The University to create a certificate program aimed at providing military members pathways into degree programs. After the program ended, Mike decided to stay to finish out his degree. Despite having a successful military career, Mike wanted to earn his degree to fulfil some personal goals. "I had a few goals in mind: one to open up more opportunities, be an example for my kids, and lastly I was a high school dropout, but I ended up going back to high school before I joined the military. I was always told I wouldn't do well in school, or I wouldn't make it."

The pandemic provided Mike the perfect opportunity to work on his goal of earning a degree. The University allowed him to transfer his earned military experience credits into the program. His Joint Services Transcript (JST) revealed that he had over 90 applicable credits to use toward the bachelor's in management. Though The University policy put a 90-credit limit on transfer credit, Mike found out that he only needed 30 more credits to finish. If he decided to attend full-time, he would be done in less than a year. The acceptance of the JST credit honored his military experience and sacrifice while providing hope for a future after the military.

Mike didn't expect the acceptance of the credit or the acceptance and compassion he received from his classmates, faculty, and advisor. He felt as though he wouldn't be able to relate to his classmates and that he may have trouble expressing himself in the forums and writing assignments, but the experience changed him.

> I really think that a lot of the forums opened my eyes. You know there's a lot of productive discourse to where you can just see that through their lens, through their eyes, their experience. They had valid points and experiences to where, I thought 'Oh, I didn't see it that way or okay now I understand this more' to where I would change some of my views on some things. I'm pretty open to everything. I always like to listen to people's points of view of things, because you have to in order to, you know, really come up with your own deductions of anything. It's like I never really understood that until the program.

Mike allowed himself to be open to other viewpoints inside and outside of the classroom. The faculty and staff encouraged him to authentically engage with other students and even open up about his experience in the military if he felt comfortable. His time in the military gave him a foundational appreciation of diverse backgrounds and differences in opinions and beliefs. "I probably got some of the acceptance through the military, too. There are so many people from different backgrounds and from all over the place. We all still had a common bond."

Not only was Mike able to complete his bachelor's degree but he was the first student to earn a Peace Corp certificate at The University that considered his military experience and college coursework. The process of earning the certificate was long, but he had The University staff working with him every step.

> The faculty fought to help me get that with just with my experiences with the Peace Corp. We had so many emails, so many conversations. It made me really proud, I guess, just to know that I had people like that behind me. And you know they did this for me, but I'm not the only one. They would do this for anyone else. So, I think that's very important. So how much the staff cares about people get in their education not just to check in the box.

He felt as though the communication and collective ownership within The University faculty and staff contributed to his success in the program and allowed him to earn the certificate. He knew that they had worked behind the scenes to pave the way for him and the other students they served. Though he is taking a break before he moves into a master's program, he plans to return to The University to keep learning. "I'm more confident now that I can continue on, I for sure think, this experience made me more confident in myself to finish. So, I know it's opened up doors for sure, so hopefully, eventually, I'll be back."

Toby's Story

Passionate about women's empowerment and management, Toby came to The University after participating in a women's conference where she met an alum during the networking

portion of the event. The alum also happened to be working for The University Connection Program that provided 15 transferrable credits at no cost to low-income students. The Connection Program was a humanities curriculum that fostered continuous learning, critical and creative thinking, and activism. The whole-person human-centered approach to learning made learning accessible and promoted social and economic justice. The alum, Miss Rita, gave Toby the information about the program and continued to follow up with her until she applied.

> She texted me to say, 'I don't see your application.' I always would give lies or excuses that we tell ourselves. And here I was given this lady a bunch of lies, and I could feel the mothering in her reply. She's like, 'I need it, buddy, in the mail today.' So, I said, okay, and I didn't turn back. I got off of that text and wrote my admissions essay into why I felt I should be accepted into this program, and that was it. I was chosen and was super excited.

She felt like it was fate that had brought her and Miss Rita together, and her tough but gentle approach to applying was what she needed to begin her educational journey. After applying and completing The Connection Program, Toby was excited and decided to continue her education with the online branch of The University, but not before she had experienced a few starts and stops.

After The Connection Program, Toby had made a choice to leave school to focus on her health after being diagnosed with breast cancer. The cancer and then becoming a mother shifted her priorities, and college was pushed to the side. However, Toby had made a promise to herself (and Miss Rita) that she would someday go back and complete her degree. Today she is in her final semester with The University, and her son is a sophomore in college. Her promise to herself is now being realized. She credits the collective support of The University as the reason why she returned even after an extended break.

> The reason why I chose to stay with [The University] after I finished [The Connection] program is because I didn't have just one person. It was a collective effort from everybody for me to finish my degree. Even when I transferred to the online program.

Everyone on campus supported that. In the program you get to graduate at the end of the program, you know, we get a chance to walk in the regular ceremony, and I was chosen as class valedictorian, and I got to give my commencement speech, and part of my speech was you know, keep going, whatever it is. This is the time that we have given back to ourselves. It was a collective effort from staffing to administration everybody that I encountered. It was their determination that you, as a student finish, and that was important to me. I wasn't lost as a number, or just you know, another student coming in it. It was definitely a family environment to me.

That family environment inspired her to return, even when statistically students who leave for extended periods do not return. She didn't use her circumstances or conflicting priorities as an excuse; she used them as fuel to fulfil the promise she had made to herself.

The transition to online was not easy for Toby. She struggled with the accountability of completing the work outside of the traditional walls of the classroom. Participating in discussion forums was difficult because it didn't feel natural to her. As a communicator and advocate, she had difficulty engaging online–it felt foreign to her. However, advice from her advisor, Kay, changed her perspective and shifted the way she felt about online learning.

Well, when I first came on, I reached out to [Kay], and her response changed my world for me. I told her, I didn't understand the concept of discussion forums. And she said 'think of it this way, you have to keep the conversation going. Don't worry about the question. Think about what you are talking about, and expand on that.' I realized I've always been able to do it.

While Kay gave her advice that shifted her perspective, Professor Devon gave her another gift. He had given her his cell number so that she could reach out if she was struggling. That act of security he provided her gave her piece of mind and an invitation for deeper engagement. "At any time, I can send him a quick text, say I'm getting nervous. And he will say seems like you need a call or a Zoom meeting, my voice has always been heard." The security of knowing she was always met with compassion and understanding made all the difference and allowed her to overcome the challenges throughout her educational journey.

After graduation in May of 2023, Toby had plans to get a Six Sigma certification, but her plans have once again shifted after seeing a speech by a professor in The University's MBA program in one of her classrooms. Her plans are now to enroll in the late Summer or Fall of 2023 in the online MBA program at The University. During her time with The University on campus and online programs, she overcame working two jobs to support her family and falling asleep in class, taking extended leaves to overcome COVID, taking care of her mother who had three surgeries in one year, academic probation, and being a mother to become a college graduate. Through it all she has advocated for accessible education opportunities in her local high schools because she feels education is the key to creating change.

Rochelle's Story

A Waldorf teacher who had opened her own preschool, Rochelle came to The University expecting that her credits from her previous institution would transfer and she would finally be able to complete her bachelor's degree. After initially being told that her credits would transfer, Rochelle had already started her first classes when she discovered The University was unable to accept her credits due to accreditation of the institution that had awarded her the Waldorf certificate. "It was very heartbreaking to get in and say, nope, it is unaccredited just like [all the other universities] said, and you're going to have to start over from the beginning." Despite her disappointment, Rochelle felt a true connection with her advisor/student support person, Kay. "I had these very grounded, very insightful conversations with Kay and others. They said 'we're going to support you in any way we can.' It has been a great experience, and I'm happy that I've done it." Rochelle was offered alternatives to traditional transfer credits like prior learning, which support her without starting over completely.

Rochelle had been looking for over seven years before she found The University, and even though her start was discouraging, her empathic and intuitive nature allowed her to feel comfortable communicating her frustrations to Kay without fear. She could sense even through phone conversations and in the online environment that she could "trust Kay and knew that she was communicating authentically because she validated my experience and gave me options for moving forward." Rochelle decided to take advantage of The University's prior learning program to gain credit for her extensive teaching background while attending classes so that she could finish quickly and efficiently without starting over completely. Several months into the program she had made significant progress that had her on track for finishing her program in two years.

Honoring her experience as an educator allowed Rochelle to feel safe with The University despite her initial second thoughts. She was passionate about Waldorf education, but after she became a mother, her focus shifted to parent education and the importance of giving parents the tools to inspire learning in their children. "It's the parents that need the support, that need the education, that need the reprogramming of belief systems. I really started to feel like if we're going to see any big change in the world, it really does have to start with parenting." Rochelle dove into learning prior to coming to The University, completing certificate programs, mentorships, and psychotherapy trainings, but none of it would count toward an actual degree even though they were serving her own personal mission. The University honored and respected Rochelle's trainings, and even though credit couldn't be awarded for them, she could use them in her program.

A move to Boulder with her family prioritized her decision to return to school. During COVID, the school where she had enrolled her daughter was struggling with teacher retention,

and she wanted to help. The school's triple accreditation required teachers to have bachelor's

degrees, which disqualified Rochelle from a teaching position. Though she had run her own

school and had years of experience, it wouldn't allow her the opportunity to teach.

> I couldn't even do the thing I was most talented at, what I loved most, and was most passionate about. I'm not even eligible. And then also I'm holding a book in my heart that wants to come out, and I've lost all of my musing being in a new place, with no friends and no purpose. I'm so happy I came back to school, because just the way I'm being challenged, the questions I'm being asked, it's helping me to reconnect to that part of myself, and I don't think I will ever stop learning. I don't think there's ever a point where you know everything, no matter how passionate we are about something.

Being told that she couldn't teach made Rochelle take action toward something new. The

University didn't offer a teaching program, so she transitioned into a Human Development

degree. She knew that she could still obtain a teaching credential, but the Human Development

program allowed her to expand her knowledge beyond the classroom and focus on the educating

the whole person.

The University faculty and staff supported her transition, but there were some differences

in engagement, communication, and understanding in some of her courses. The differences were

even more noticeable given that many of the faculty were supportive and "in the trenches" with

the students. She felt comfortable using her voice in the courses with one particular faculty

member but very guarded in classes where a faculty member had rigid expectations.

> One instructor is always accessible and available. I feel extra supported, extra alive, and the topics that he brings are amazing. And then, you know, there's other instructors, one in particular that I thought, 'how do I avoid this person?' Because there's no interaction and very harsh grading and there are contradictions. I'm always thinking, 'did I do everything exactly right,' and I feel like I lose access to my voice a little bit, because I'm just too worried about doing everything perfectly. The environment changes depending on who's holding it.

The change in environment for Rochelle didn't deter her progress or success, but it wasn't a safe place for her or other students to be authentically engaged. The grading and teaching from the instructor were often punishing, accusatory, and designed for failure rather than student success.

Luckily, that experience was overshadowed by relationships she built with Dr. Devon and her favorite professor, John. Dr. Devon took time to explain assignments in a one-on-one meeting and remained accessible. John even mailed her a copy of a textbook she couldn't find. She found safety and comfort in Dr. Devon, John, and Kay. As an empath and educator, Rochelle felt that the online environment for the most part was a "wholesome, integrated experience" that was cultivated by the educator mentality of the faculty and staff.

> You know you can feel someone's energy. You feel their intention. You feel how much in love they are with being there or not. You're going through, and you want to respond to each other in the class, and I appreciate that because that doesn't often happen even in real classrooms. So, this interaction that's cultivated between the students is very nourishing for me. Everyone has the opportunity to feel seen.

Feeling seen and heard is a critical part of the educational experience at any age. Rochelle finds herself being a teacher even in the classrooms as a student. She wants to make her classmates feel "comfortable and nurtured" and may one day use what she learned in a new classroom of her own. She plans to continue her education at The University if that is possible for her. For now, she is working to finish her bachelor's degree and taking some trauma-informed education courses as part of her plan to graduate and continuing to expand her knowledge.

Marty's Story

The pandemic and the death of his mother created a ripple effect that brought Marty to The University. As a music major right out of high school and then a professional musician, Marty never planned on returning to college. Both of Marty's parents were teachers, so when he decided to leave school to become a "rock star," it made a huge impact on his family.

> The pandemic started, and I had actually been doing a lot of traveling, and leading workshops. And now, all of a sudden, I can't go anywhere, and my grandmother graduated college when she was eighty-nine, and so I was thinking about my grandmother, and I was curious about how close I was to getting a degree.

Inspired by his grandmother and his parents, Marty started researching programs he was interested in. After talking to several institutions, Marty talked to an admission representative at The University. "I talked to the admissions department and everything lined up really easily. I had tried some other colleges and [talked] to their admissions representatives. I felt like I was talking to students and it seemed like they were trying to sell me stuff. [The University] was more personable and warmer." Marty was interested in an individualized education that honored his past, current life experiences, and work.

Marty talked first to admissions, where he was told he was very close to completing his degree, but as it turned out some of his credits weren't transferrable. Frustrated, he met with Erin, the prior learning coordinator, and Kay, his advisor.

> Admissions had given me wrong information about the credits that I needed, and how long it would take, and although that was unfortunate it later got rectified, but it was really frustrating. I spoke to [Erin] and [Kay] about it. I felt like they knew who I was and what I was about, and what was important to me.

The advising staff made him feel at ease and offered him a "personalized" experience that was more about authenticity and connection than the bottom line. Erin and Kay gave him alternative options that would not extend his graduation date. Marty was able to take a few more transferrable classes outside of The University and bring them into his individualized program. He realized that the issues he had experienced with admissions were part of a bigger problem with academia and the administrative structure pushing quantitative results and lack of training.

Authentic relationships came out of his time at The University. He keeps in touch with a few students he had taken classes with. He was also inspired by one of his professors, Dr.

Malcolm, who incorporated music into the online learning environment. "He incorporated a lot of music uh like musicians and Motown and um like Latin music, and I was a professional musician. It was great to have that, you know, as a different lens, to approach the work through, and then to um connect with that professor on that level." Dr. Malcolm's nontraditional approach to the online classroom fostered a culture of creativity and freedom of expression in the students.

Marty continued his education at another university that offered a master's in public administration. For a final project in the program he filmed a documentary on reimagining safety that is now being shown at film festivals. In addition, he is working with several social justice organizations to introduce the film and hopes to give it more exposure at colleges as well. While Marty remarked he would have been successful in any institution, he credits some of his success with the educational foundation he received at The University. "None of that would have happened had it not been for this BA program, and then me going into the master's program that I went into, and my filmmaking background." He was able to use his background and education to create something impactful. In addition to the work he is doing with the documentary he is hoping to join a doctoral program so that he can continue learning.

Pam's Story

Pam had always dreamed of becoming a writer and one day working in a library, but outside influences made her question a bachelor's degree in creative writing. Her associate's degree was in liberal arts with an emphasis on healing studies, and she chose to apply to a bachelor's in Human Services program at The University despite her own desire to write. Her initial meeting with her academic advisor Kay left her questioning if human services was the

right major for her. Kay informed her that the tone of her voice had changed when she spoke about writing and her goal of having a retirement career as a librarian.

> I was depressed about [choosing human services] and making that decision, and I wasn't listening to what I wanted, and I was so glad [Kay] picked up on that, and that it was required for me to talk to her first before going with my program. I would have forced my way through that program because I thought I should. I was glad they made me talk to [Kay] before entering the program, or I wouldn't have been brave enough to change.

That conversation with Kay set her on a path that was full of creativity. She "loved every minute of every course" that she took. Her creativity carried through her program, and she started to be more open to expressing her beliefs and values publicly.

Pam felt as though she was free to finally use her voice and The University gave her the tools and confidence to advocate for the things she believed in. "The University was so supportive of diversity and encouraging of a bigger world view to their students, and they encourage community action and involvement." Her experiences at The University inspired her to enter a master's in Library Science program. However, she quickly realized her experiences at The University were much different than the graduate program she had chosen.

> I genuinely felt like I was enriching myself as a human while I was learning, and at my master's program I felt like I was being tested and pushed and knocked down. Like they wanted to be academically challenging, but they didn't really care about fostering the human. I realized for me to learn, I have to feel like I'm being fostered as a human and supported in taking this information out into the world in a good way.

Disappointed, Pam decided to leave her graduate program, but she was proud of herself for realizing she was not in the right place. "I was so glad that I had the voice inside of me that said, you deserve a better education than what they can offer." Pam felt changed and challenged as a human at The University and realized she needed a similar environment to continue to learn.

In her bachelor's program Dr. Devon helped Pam submit one of her essays to a humanitarian foundation sponsored by a Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient.

Though she didn't win the contest, she made it farther in the competition than she thought possible. She continues to write humanitarian essays and environmental letters to hopefully spark change in her community and beyond. "I feel strong like I feel like I can make a difference now. I feel like I know how to go about things like that to make a difference." Her plans now include more submissions to contests, writing environmental and ethical pieces, and finishing a memoir. She credits Dr. Devon, Kay, and The University for giving her voice back and taking control "[Dr. Devon and Kay] charted my course, in a way that was so personal that I would have missed out on so many things if I hadn't listened to both of them, and now I'm doing what I love."

Aaron's Story

At 56, Aaron had a successful career as a Director of Education and manager at several different salons and cosmetology schools, but obtaining his degree was important for him. When the pandemic temporarily halted operations of both the salon and school where he was employed, he decided it was time to finish his degree.

> I looked back at my employment history and educational history, and decided that I wanted to take a different pathway as far as where I was heading in life. It was a little scary because I'd never taken a fully online course before. I wasn't sure how I would do in that situation, and being a people person, and so I decided to try it, since I was at home without distractions. I jumped in and joined, and it was one of the better decisions of my life.

He had prior experience with The University because he lived across the street from one of the physical campuses. The decision to enroll online seemed more manageable once he met with his advisor Kay and she helped him formulate a pathway that would fit his needs.

He hoped that the online experience would be as "learner centered and interactive" as it was on campus. He was surprised that the curriculum was similar and that he had the freedom to express himself and learn in a way that fit his needs. After a long conversation with Kay, he decided on a major and started on the pathway they had created together.

> It made me more comfortable with just kind of trudging ahead to figure out where I was headed in the process, and I think this time there was a lot more interaction than in the past when I've gone to other universities or colleges. Where you just kind of walk in, and there's no one there to really answer your questions. No one there to really help you put together a path; this is much more personalized than in the past when they just put the path away in front of and, you and say, this is it. We had a lot more conversations about all the different options and ways to put it together.

The personalized experience and communication from The University gave him comfort knowing the staff had his best interests in mind, because they took the time to learn about him as a person. The online campus offered him a service more tailored than the on-ground campuses he had attended, because they were fully focused on his needs, he felt as if he was a priority. "It was intimate in a way. You know you're connecting one on one with someone. So that was a pleasant surprise, I think, for me to find that connection in the middle of all of what was going on in the world."

Aaron had always been a "people person" and a good communicator, so with taking online classes he did experience some isolation and missed the classmate interactions. However, he began to develop authentic relationships with faculty and his advisor that satisfied his need for personal interaction. He was able to get to know his professors through discussions, videos, and their replies to forum postings. There was more personal interaction and feedback in the forums and on assignments. Group projects with classmates several semesters into his program afforded him the opportunity to develop a bit more connection with a few of his fellow students.

> It was amazing to have a group that spread out throughout the country and all of us to be able to work on the same document and have all our ideas on there and then putting the ideas together all online without having in person meetings with each other. We got to know each other really well, and we got to see each other's families while we were working on our project.

He also noted that he came to love the online environment because of the intimate way you could give your thoughts and opinions without fear in the classrooms that would have been harder in

person. The experience of online productive discourse "broke down barriers" that would have been present in a traditional setting.

Aaron developed COVID right before a final assignment was due, and he was fighting exhaustion and neurological side effects that kept him from doing his best work. He reached out to his professor and was relieved when the professor simply said, "I'll extend the deadline, please take care of yourself." That kind of understanding left Aaron thankful he had chosen The University. Now when he is overwhelmed, he knows that a quick email or phone call can afford him grace and space to center himself. "I appreciate the fact that they understood what was going on in the world and with us and allowed for kind of a little flexibility in the in the deadlines. So, we can breathe."

Aaron will graduate with his bachelor's in May of 2023, and he hopes to keep going, but the financial burden concerns him. His spouse is working toward their doctoral degree (at The University), and another set of student loans would be difficult to manage. However, he hopes to one day earn a doctoral degree as well and continue with The University. He credits The University's programming with helping find his voice and passion for wanting to continue to be part of the educational process. "To have a process like this makes you feel empowered, and I think that the way the program was set up to, you know, find your voice first, and then once you find it, you can use it to help reach your goals."

Paul's Story

A successful 30-year computer architect consultant career and a nomadic lifestyle that was not conducive to an on-campus traditional education led Paul to The University. On the recommendation of his counselor he looked into The University to help him achieve his goals of becoming a trauma therapist. Despite having years of technical experience, Paul had no online

presence that would have provided him a look into the social interaction of classroom discussions. He had discussed his reservations about online learning with Kay (his advisor), and she had assured him the learning curve would be short.

> I was very comfortable with technical computer related stuff, but partly because of that reason I have zero social media, zero online friends. So, it was really weird coming in trying to communicate through these forums. But eventually, after the first or second course, I started making some good friends. It was pretty cool.

The conversation with Kay helped him feel more confident in the online learning process, and she also helped him figure out a pathway to achieve his goals quickly and efficiently. His main concern was time to completion, and once he had a clearly defined plan in place, he quickly immersed himself in coursework.

Though advising was smooth, he experienced systematic problems in several of his courses. Those issues involved clarity around what was expected of students, due date confirmations, and outdated syllabi. He was able to communicate his concerns with Kay, and while they were not all solved, he felt heard, and she gave him options for dealing with those problems while she worked behind the scenes to ensure they were being addressed. He developed a system that helps him prepare for each class so if there are issues, they would be taken care of before courses begin. "What I do now is go through every course at the start of the term, and I write down all the due dates that are listed in there, and when they conflict, I check with the instructor to make sure which one is correct." He feels comfortable enough to communicate directly with his faculty from the start.

While systematic issues often disturb the online learning environment, Paul felt as though the coursework and relationships have served him well. He had been working through traumatic experiences from his past, and he began opening up in some of his writing. His faculty were supportive, encouraging, and understanding even after class ended. "Some of my professors have

come back to me, and thanked me for what I've written, around trauma things like that and even said that I things that I've written have taught them something." The customized and authentic feedback made him feel truly seen and heard.

In the past few months, Paul has been caring for his partner who was recently diagnosed with cancer, and his faculty have been supportive and remind him to take care of himself as he navigates his partner's sickness. One of his professors, John, even shared his own personal journey with Paul and his classmates, which helped create a reciprocal sharing inside and outside of the classroom. The personal experience he had earning his bachelor's, have influenced Paul to one day return to The University to continue his degree. For now, Paul's goal of being a trauma therapist is being put on hold until The University offers a fully online program. He wants to continue online due to his remote lifestyle but will wait until the time is right and he can return to The University.

Cinn's Story

As a successful operations manager in the music and entertainment industry, 66-year-old Cinn wanted to return to school to finish her degree as a personal goal. She needed a university that worked around her fast-paced lifestyle that included both working full-time and volunteering/coordinating as an animal welfare activist. Prior to coming to The University, Cinn had attended two other institutions that were less than supportive and where the communication with staff seemed inauthentic and rushed.

> I was enrolled in another program, and essentially my academic advisor kind of ghosted me. When I took a look at how close I was to graduating and found out that I didn't have any of the things they I needed in order to graduate, I decided this isn't going to work, so I decided to pursue a degree at The University, where I had somebody helping me figure out which ones to enroll in, which would be my best possibilities based on what I was pursuing. So, at [The University] there was someone helping me with decisions. Having that assistance from [The University] made all the difference in the world, and when I enrolled in the class, I knew it was toward my degree and that I would enjoy it.

Cinn was able to formulate a plan with her advisor Kay that honored her prior credit while letting

her explore the things she was truly interested in. She had chosen an individualized major so that

she could have some control of the classes and design of her program. Because the degree was a

personal goal and not required for her career, she could choose classes that gave her the freedom

to explore her creativity, identity, and passions.

Taking courses during the pandemic, Cinn, like many other students, experienced

uncertainty and fear about what the world would look like. However, she felt supported and

validated as she navigated classes as a co-constructor of knowledge with her professors, advisor,

and other students. Despite feeling supported in the classes, the pandemic did limit some of the

student relationship building because of the additional stressors outside of the classroom.

> Everybody was feeling incredibly squeezed, and I think when your whole life suddenly
> squeezes down to virtual because you're not going into the office, and you're not really
> going to a grocery store, it became difficult. So, I don't feel like it was a failure within the
> system of online school. I just feel like it was a challenge again because of COVID. I
> think I might have gotten together for coffee and discussed an assignment or two with a
> few of them. I could see that happening, but not when we were masking up and staying
> home. That was just not going to happen.

She lived in close proximity to several other classmates, but everyone was keeping their distance,

and outside of the classroom life was difficult for everyone. Relationship building for Cinn

remained inside of the virtual classroom with students, but she was always able to connect with

her professors, university staff, and advisors if there were issues.

Cinn became a caregiver to a close friend who was in the end stages of a battle with

cancer during her time with The University. She juggled the conflicting priorities of school,

work, doctor calls, and protecting her friend from COVID. The conflicting priorities caused Cinn

to rely on The University to be communicative, supportive, flexible, and understanding.

> I was caring for my friend, who was in the last stages of cancer. I was dealing with a lot
> of back and forth with her doctors. Even though she was starting to see results for the

cancer, she died of COVID. So, it was one of those really difficult times. Occasionally I didn't like get my emails read when I should have, but nobody gave me any grief about it. I think there was an understanding that we're trying to traverse a very rocky terrain at the moment, so I felt like everybody really tried hard to make sure we got through this in a very polite and efficient way. I didn't have to get pushed around, you know, to other people it seemed like the first person I contacted either brought someone else into the conversation or handled it.

She needed to be able to have her questions answered quickly and efficiently so that she could focus on protecting and taking care of her friend. The University provided her service that made sure she was heard and seen each time she interacted with them. There was a collective ownership with her advisors and professors that allowed her to be taken care of in usually one phone call or email. None of her questions or requests were deemed "unreasonable," and the accommodations she requested with advising or registration were always handled. Since graduating, she has been exploring her options for returning to get a master's degree. She is interested in The University's psychology program, but her passion for animals and makes her conflicted. She would also be open to an environmental science degree because it aligns with her animal advocacy work and volunteer experience. Whatever degree she chooses, she wants to continue with The University and online because of the established relationship she has.

> I feel like I can trust [The University]. You know it'll be more of a hands-on approach. I feel like I can get like more assistance in terms of choosing what to pursue. I will be enrolling at [The University] just because I trust the school to make a difference for me. It's not to say that I didn't look at other schools. [The University's] approach was better because they said if you're interested in in doing something, we're here to help you and they didn't try to sell you.

The University's approach to her education left a mark on Cinn because they honored her journey and made sure what she chose made sense for her. They took the time to give her the information and actually talk to her about her motivations and goals. She is excited about sharing what she learned at The University with her community and beyond until she returns to pursue her next degree.

Harold's Story

Harold had been traveling 40 weeks or more per year running his own business in television and movie syndication and production prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. His lucrative career in entertainment was not dependent on gaining a degree, but it had been his personal goal for many years when the pandemic provided him "the gift of time" to finally finish. "I had never completed my bachelor's degree, which had not been an impediment to my success in my career, but it was always in the back of my head, a sort of source of disappointment, even shame, that I had not completed it." As he began to look for a university that was right for him, he recalled several friends and acquaintances raving about The University.

> I live in Los Angeles, and I have a lot of friends who sought their degrees at [The University] to become marriage and family therapists, and I just continually got such positive, even raving feedback from participants. It was one of the first one of the first schools that I looked at for that reason, and I am glad that I did.

Having been granted the "sacred gift of time" by the pandemic, Harold decided that it was time to finally finish his degree. He was excited about the prospect of completing a degree at an institution that was so highly regarded among his friends.

His first interaction with Matt, the admissions representative, surprised him when the call turned into a discussion about his future and how The University would support his goals.

> I wasn't expecting that experience. It really proved to be the closer. You know, because he was. He was fully engaged. I felt very welcomed and heard, and he walked me through the whole process. I had to get my transcripts from the other schools, and you know all that stuff that seemed so daunting to me. And yet he was welcoming, and he somehow made it much more an easier process than I expected.

The experience of working with an admissions department focused on his goals rather than making a "sell" was unexpected but welcomed. The support, he recalled, didn't end there and continued through each department he came into contact with.

He worked with Kay, his advisor, and Erin, the prior learning coordinator, to ensure that he had a cohesive plan that would allow him to finish quickly and efficiently. Harold felt not only heard but "handheld" from start to finish in his program because of the supportive culture of The University faculty and staff.

> To this day I tell people about Kay and her the role she's played in my education. I wouldn't have got here without her. She was all the about me and supporting me. She knows you. She heard me. She helped me with picking my classes, and she even helped me get registered for them. It was fantastic. I felt heard and cared for, and you know, helped.

The authenticity and connection he felt from Kay carried over into the classroom. When he started coursework, he was surprised that faculty scheduled virtual office hours and meeting times that weren't required but available for connection opportunities. Further, he felt authenticity coming from the discussion forums as students and faculty navigated the classes together.

Toward the end of his degree program a conversation with Kay about his future classes and plans after graduation led to his decision to continuing education. In addition to being in the entertainment industry, Harold was also a chaplain and interested in transpersonal psychology but wasn't sure how that would fit or what path to take to get there. Kay suggested he look into individualized master's programs either at The University or in other institutions that would allow him to design a degree that honored his past experiences, interests, current coursework and future plans.

> I discovered the credits from my last two classes could be applied to both the bachelor's program and the master's program, and I just thought that was such a brilliant incentive. I chose to spiritual psychology instead of transpersonal, because no one knows what transpersonal means. Most of my colleagues do a master's of divinity. But in my work as a chaplain, I find that 90% of the engagements I have with patients, the discussions are in the realm of the existential and not in the realm of the theological, and so I designed this degree really in service to that and it has been seamless, flawless, and fantastic. Every

piece of it has been awesome. The fact that I have recall of the names of everybody that I've interacted with. It says something about the experience.

Harold transitioned into the master's program immediately following his bachelor's completion and is on track to graduate soon. While he described his experiences as flawless, he was assigned to another advisor when The University grew during the year after the pandemic. He had built a relationship with Kay, and the service he received, while still good, was not exceptional. The bond he had with Kay was built on trust and understanding, and he wanted to continue the journey with her. Luckily, The University allowed him to transfer back to Kay quickly and finish out his studies under her guidance and direction. "I was treated so respectfully and warmly by everybody, but [Kay] understood and heard me and knew what I needed sometimes without asking."

Jackson's Story

A disabled veteran living with PTSD, Jackson needed a university that was "safe" for him to learn without being within the confines of a traditional classroom. Having started at an on-ground campus of The University, Jackson made the transition to the online environment when he realized that modality allowed him the safety and freedom to learn without fear. His goal for returning was to publish the works that he had been dreaming about for many years. As entered the program, he was able to communicate those goals to his advisor Kay and his admissions representative Ellie. However, the real work began when he assembled his support team at The University, which included the disability support person, Erin. Kay, Ellie, and Erin helped him make a plan that included his coursework, technology accommodations, and future plans.

> I was very clear that my incentive for going back to school had to do with the intention to publish. And one of the criteria that allowed that to happen was my relationship with the disability support services person [Erin], which allowed me accommodations that allows

my reconfigured brain to be able to participate as a student. That always involved making the request to the faculty members before each course. So, once I got with my team [Kay and Ellie] included, I was very concise and clear about what my needs were.

Erin put together a list of accommodations that Jackson could utilize that made learning more accessible for him. Those accommodations allowed him to be successful despite the disabilities that threatened to derail his progress. Erin advocated for him with faculty members and remained a champion throughout his program.

There were several roadblocks along his educational journey. Some of the adjunct faculty were difficult and noncommunicative and didn't understand the accommodation process. However, Erin continued to advocate for him, and he found another ally in his journey, Dr. Conner. Dr. Conner became an inspirational mentor to Jackson as he went out of his way to make sure the classroom was accessible. "I could not have gotten luckier because he was the chair of the program. He told me, 'I get how your brain works, and this is what we're going to do,' then, you know that's that. I was given a method to follow that turned out to be a path for successful conclusion for me." Dr. Conner and Erin worked together on a solutions-based approach that customized and altered assignments to fit his needs, which allowed Jackson to thrive in the online environment.

That experience led Jackson to continue with The University in the Individualized Master of Arts program. He felt safe at The University so continuing the journey made sense.

> I think of the humanity and the way the community supported me. This is a complete privilege to be able to finish my degree. The reason I had to leave the on-ground campus previously had to do with my disability. So, to bring that full circle and feel supported and feel a sense of accomplishment was something that I am very thankful for.

Jackson has now completed his master's in individualized studies and is writing his memoirs in hopes that he can continue to write and publish his works. He stays in contact with The

University team he built and hopes to one day return for a doctoral degree or as an advisor/mentor so that he can advocate for other students.

Bonita's Story

As a full-time writer and editor, 70-year-old Bonita had always wanted to finish her bachelor's degree. The pandemic had just begun, so the online option (despite her proximity to a campus branch) provided her with a way to safely finish her degree. Her decades-long career had resulted in several awards and even more notable published works. The solitude of the pandemic prompted her to revisit the idea of returning to college. "I wanted to turn to the two things that had never failed me: reading and writing, and this seemed an opportunity to do both; and frankly it exceeded my expectations, which is why I kept going."

Bonita was impressed with the authenticity of her interactions with her advisor Kay and two of her professors, Dr. Devon and Dr. Malcolm. All three of them provided a level of service and interaction that influenced her decision to continue her education in The University's MFA program. She felt "heard consistently" throughout her program by students, faculty, and staff.

> It isn't easy when you're older than most of the people there, and most of the instructors, it was not just about subject matter. It was about who we were. [Dr. Malcolm] especially in poetry class he clearly heard everyone and responded to everyone individually. [Dr. Devon] actually had office hours, voluntary office hours. I know they helped people finish that study that we had to do for him, because that was a class where we actually had to do a research study. I think, without those office hours, without that personal contact it would have been impossible for some others in the class.

Bonita had taught several online professional writing workshops and knew the struggle for online learners. They often felt like numbers and didn't have opportunities for authentic connections beyond the virtual classroom environment. She was able to form relationships with other students that continued past graduation. The environment encouraged students to share freely and empowered them to form relationships with one another and their faculty. "I made

relationships in the classroom that still exist. In fact, one of the friends I made in that environment totally online is now in the graduate program that I'm in, she came right after me, and she just started in this last residency. It's her first and my third." Both students decided to stay at The University, but for Bonita, the experience made her "not want to stop" but to keep learning.

As a professional writer, Bonita had experienced exclusion from the male-dominated writing community. That exclusion caused some fear as she entered back into academia, where she felt that she might not have fit in. "I came to understand that I came from a very competitive white male world where it really was very much a competition. I was very much excluded, and I felt inclusion here, which is why I didn't want to leave." Her decision to stay at The University also allowed her to relax into being a student because she felt as though she didn't have to fight for her place. "You know I've had to fight for my success in the past, so it's nice when you don't have to fight, and it's nice when you feel that people are on your side. You know it's everything." Her online and hybrid experience with The University has given her the confidence to keep learning even after her master's program ends. "The experience gave me the confidence to say, 'Sure, let's just get a master's', and then my friends are all saying, 'When are you going to get a PhD?' and I don't know I'm so happy but I don't want it to be over." While she is undecided if she will continue her education by joining a doctoral program after she earns her MFA, she knows that reading and writing will always be part of her journey.

Sabine's Story

Living in remote Alaska, 46-year-old Sabine (a wife and mother of two) needed a university and program that were accessible and accommodating to her busy schedule. Her children had attended a Waldorf school, and The University had one of the country's leading

Waldorf education programs, which caused her to research programs that might be available online. Despite her disappointment in not being able to move straight into a master's degree program, Sabine was given options for quickly and efficiently completing her bachelor's and put in touch with her advisor Kay. "Going back to school can be really intimidating, I am older. When I went when I was 19, it was really overwhelming and I didn't have a lot of support. So, I had all that kind of anxiety in me even though I was a grown-up. I felt like [Kay] held my hand in a really lovely way."

Sabine was worried about fitting in because of her age. However, Kay assured her that most of the students were in the same age range and that she would find intersectionalities and opportunities for connection. "It's funny that in the classes and like the discussion forums, there's so many people like me. It just feels good, and it's like such a beautiful community." That community atmosphere has allowed Sabine to feel authenticity in the forums. She found that students remembered details like vacations, families, and interests and checked in on one another inside and outside of the classroom.

In the Human Development program Sabine has been able to connect with several of her professors. One of her professors, John, has been "empathetic and compassionate" by creating a safe classroom environment where he frequently checks in, gives personalized feedback, and posts weekly videos going over the material. "I'm always excited when I get his classes because I feel like I learn a lot from him, but also it is low stress, like it's a nice balance. He understands that we're all living in the real world and not just going to school." John fosters a culture of trust with his students that extends beyond the classroom, as he also makes time for students that need extra support or advice.

Her decision to go back to college and subsequently enroll in courses was quick. Even though the process was fast, she felt as though the support and encouragement received made her successful.

> I think it's a really beautiful service that [The University] offers. I think that they have a really great structure. It's a different experience than anything I thought college could be, and I'm really grateful for that. And I think if more people knew about it, they would come. I'm grateful that I get to go at this age, because I've already got some life experience, and I can bring that into it. And so, I don't regret not finishing school when I in my twenties, because I'm grateful that I get to do it now. You know this is a lovely program, and I'm really glad that I found it.

Her initial plan for after graduating with her bachelor's degree was to complete a Waldorf certification with The University but now she is considering a program in psychology or counseling like some of her classmates. However, her children are now 10 and 12 so she is taking a break to spend more time traveling as a family.

Monique's Story

Wife, mother of three, entrepreneur, and healer, Monique needed a university that would allow her flexibility and the freedom to be herself. She had previous experience at one of The University's West Coast campuses, but the commute didn't allow her to have the practicality that an online campus could provide. "When I saw that there was an online program, it just felt perfect for my needs for and the kind of education that I wanted and the kind of program that I knew how they treated their students and they help, foster critical thinking and everything was very community oriented." She wanted to be finished with her bachelor's quickly so that she could continue on to a master's program, then to a doctor in psychology program. Her goal was to work in intergenerational healing and with the BIPOC community, and The University's programming and values supported her goals.

The University provided her with a foundation of support that helped her feel heard in a way that she had not experienced at other institutions.

> It wasn't like I'm just another number, you know. Everyone has been very warm, very welcoming. The way that they respond to me that they've heard what I just said. They understand it, and everyone's just been trying to help me towards reaching that goal or whatever it is that's come up where there's been a challenge, you know people have been very supportive, which has been very helpful, because 2022 started off great. And then it turned into the most train wreck of a year I've ever experienced. I didn't think I'd be here, close to graduation. But this time I've stayed despite the hardships.

Monique's hardships and sickness had threatened to derail her graduation, but through the support system The University provided and her grit, she remained on track. She worked closely with faculty and her advisor, Kay, to ensure she would finish. The "genuine" communication and understanding allowed her to stay focused.

During her sickness with COVID, pneumonia, and several other personal struggles one professor went above and beyond to help her.

> I remember one professor telling me, that once she heard my story about, a mom of three kids and working, and just went through all these life events in less than a six-month period. She said that she had told herself, 'I want to make sure I can help this person graduate.' That was so meaningful because most professors, you don't have any idea that they care, like your traditional classroom with 200 other students. No one's really dialing in on you, and making sure that you're you are able to feel supported to keep going, even if it's just the words it's not helping with the work right, because that you do on your own, but just knowing that they care is important.

Monique was impressed that the faculty member had taken the time to know her story and circumstances before denying a request for an extension. The professor worked with Monique to ensure she would be successful in the class and on track for graduation.

The experience with the professor coupled with the support she received from her advisor, Kay, and other university staff inspired Monique want to stay with The University for her master's program. However, The University only offers traditional classroom programs in her field. Past experiences on campus at The University have made Monique consider other

institutions for her master's program. The on-campus environment did not provide her with the same level of service or support that online offered her. For now, she plans on taking a break before making her final decision.

Analysis of the Data

Through the participant interviews several themes appeared that connected researcher assumptions and student success literature. The four themes from the data are: (1) collective; equitable, targeted, and focused student support; (2) authentic and reciprocal relationships; (3) collective and nurtured hearing and listening; and 4.) future goals and empowerment.

Themes

Collective, Equitable, Targeted, and Focused Student Support

One of the most important themes that came out of the student interviews was the impact of collective, equitable, targeted, and focused student support. Stemming from the broader proposed research mentioned (authentic engagement, collective ownership, communication, and human centeredness), student support should be tailored to student needs and wants. While all the interviews mentioned student support and its relevance to their individual success, each student also mentioned the collection of university employees (advisor, professors, staff) as the co-constructors of their success. All of the participants only named one or less experience that could have hindered their persistence or completion. Each of the negative experiences were from lack of collective, equitable, targeted, or focused support.

Authentic and Reciprocal Relationships

All of the participants had stories of authentic and/or reciprocal relationships built inside and/or outside of the classroom. While some students formed friendships (learner-learner), others bonded with professors and advisors (learner-instructor or learner-advisor relationships). As

mentioned in Cuseo's (2018) theory that relationships in the online learning environment can be fostered and impactful indicators of student achievement, this study also found a similar correlation. The co-construction of knowledge and co-learners' relationships are key to student success. McDougall (2015) also suggests that authenticity connects learning in real life while forming relationships in online learning environments.

Collective and Nurtured Hearing and Listening

While The University and its stakeholders have a vested interest in student success, there is often a disconnect in listening and actually being heard. All of the participants had experiences where they felt a nurtured sense of belonging because their voices were heard both in success and in failures. Some examples of that include Zoom meetings on request, referrals to university services, phone conversations on request, expedient response times to email communication, and classroom participation from faculty. Nurtured listening as a gateway to student success inside and outside of the classroom should be the cornerstone of online learning. Having the freedom to share and compare experiences leads to self-reflection and transformative learning that is meaningful to future selves (McDougall, 2015).

Future Goals and Empowerment

The participants within the study all had unique goals when entering the programs they chose. As noted in the majority of the individual student stories (19/20), participants were asked about their goals prior to entering the program. Some went as far to comment that they had not been asked about their goals at previous institutions or dismissed if they mentioned them. Further, all students (20/20) were encouraged to share their goals at some point during their journey either inside or outside of the classroom.

Quantifiable Data

While this qualitative narrative research focuses on student voice, perceptions, emotional responses, and overall experience, several quantitative figures emerged from the stories of the participants. Those quantifiable figures further support the importance of qualitative narrative inquiry because they represent important factors relative to the research, such as the likelihood to continue education and how student experience effects future student populations. It would be a disservice to the quality of the research to omit discussion of the quantitative data found from the participant interviews.

Quantitative Impact on Continuing Education

Studies have shown that students who are satisfied with their programs are more likely to complete their degrees and then enter into continuing education programs (Calhoun et al., 2017; Centner, 2014; Kuh, et al., 2006). Table 4.2 displays the participant impact of satisfaction in the student experience and their likelihood to continue into master's programming (all students indicated they were likely to continue to other programs due to the service they received).

Table 4.2

Participant Continuing Education Plans

Pseudonym	Continued to Master's Program	Plans on Attending Master's Program	Status of Graduate Program	Internal/External Program Selection
La'Nay	Yes	Yes	Complete	External
Lynn	Yes	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Katerina	Yes	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Forest	Yes	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Jerry	No	Yes	Future	Internal
Ty	No	Yes	Future	Internal
Simone	Yes	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Mike	Yes	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Toby	Yes	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Rochelle	No	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Marty	Yes	Yes	Complete	External
Pam	Yes	Yes	Future	Internal
Aaron	Yes	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Paul	No	Yes	Future	Internal
Cinn	Yes	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Harold	Yes	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Jackson	Yes	Yes	Complete	Internal
Bonita	Yes	Yes	In Progress	Internal
Sabine	No	Yes	Future	Undecided

Pseudonym	Continued to Master's Program	Plans on Attending Master's Program	Status of Graduate Program	Internal/External Program Selection
Monique	No	Yes	Future	Undecided

In this study 100% of the 20 participants indicated that they were planning on continuing their

education in the form of professional programs, certificates, or terminal degrees. 70% (14/20) of

participants have already enrolled in or graduated from a master's degree program. 86% (12/14)

of the students enrolled in internal programs offered by The University, whereas 14% (2/13) of

the students chose to pursue degrees at other institutions. Figure 4.1 compares the number of

students enrolled in or completed in external or external programs.

Figure 4.1

Chart Reflecting Internal and External Continuing Enrollment Trends

INTERNAL/EXTERNAL ENROLLMENT

14% EXTERNAL PROGRAMS

86% INTERNAL PORGRAMS
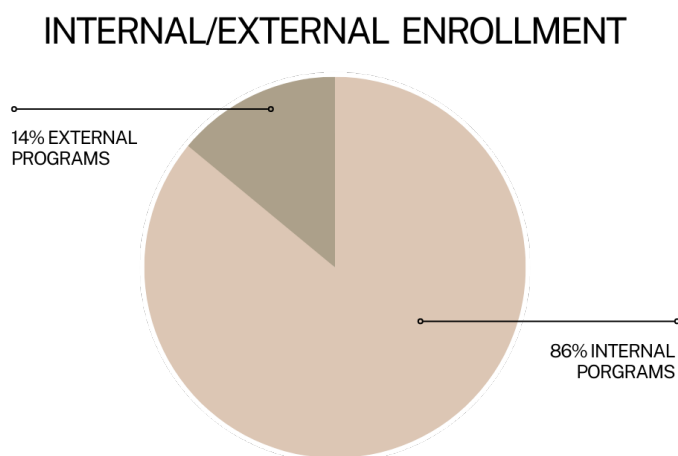
Of the 14%, all of the students indicated that they would have continued at The University if

their programs of study would have been offered. Given the timeliness of the study in relation to

the pandemic (students surveyed had been enrolled in a bachelor's program in the last three

years), 25% (5/20) of the students are still enrolled in a bachelor's degree completion program at

The University, while 75% (15/20) have moved into other programs. One participant (5%) indicated they were undecided about their future degree plan but had attended one external master's program and stopped due to philosophical differences. That participant also indicated they were considering The University for their continuing education, but they had not made a final decision or program choice.

An empirical study of the relationship between service quality and student loyalty conducted by Chandra et al. (2018) further validates the research completed here. They found that service quality provided by institutions of higher learning directly and indirectly impacts student loyalty (Chandra et al., 2018). As indicated in Tables 2 and 3 student loyalty leads to continuing education and referrals from satisfied students. Their study focused on a framework of service quality in commercial sectors; however, the framework can be applied to institutions as well. The framework created by Parasuraman et al. (1998) outlined the following as deliverables:

a. Tangibility: physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel.

b. Reliability: ability to perform the service dependably and accurately.

c. Responsiveness: willingness to help customers and ability to inspire trust and confidence.

d. Assurance: knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.

e. Empathy: caring, individualized attention provided for customers.

(Parasuraman et al., 1998; see also Chandra et al., 2018, p. 111).

The combined deliverables of the study represented a holistic and human centered structure that can be applied to foster student loyalty, satisfaction, and ultimately student return for future programming.

Quantitative Impact of Referral, Reputation, and Research

It is important to quantify another factor that emerged from the student interviews in relation to how they had been introduced to The University. In Table 4.3 and Figure 4.2 quantifiable data showing how a student is exposed to The University is shown. 75% of the participants (15/20) had been referred by friends, colleagues, psychologists, therapists, or family members who were part of The University's alumni network. A smaller percentage of participants (20%, or 4/20) had come to know of The University by reputation. Three of the four participants stating reputation as a pathway, lived in proximity (50 miles or less) to one of The University's physical campuses. The final participant indicated a connection with Waldorf Education programming as the reputable draw.

Table 4.3

University Introduction by Participant

| Pseudonym	Referral/Reputation/Research
La'Nay	Referral
Lynn	Reputation
Katerina	Referral
Forest	Referral
Jerry	Referral
Ty	Referral
Simone	Referral
Mike	Referral
Toby	Referral
Rochelle	Research
Marty	Referral
Pam	Reputation
Aaron	Reputation
Paul	Referral
Cinn	Referral
Harold	Referral
Jackson	Referral
Bonita	Referral
Sabine	Reputation
Monique	Referral

Finally, and most impactful, one student indicated research as their introduction to The University. Research in this context indicates exposure to one of the following: (a) social media, (b) advertisements/targeted marketing, and (c) online keyword searches.

Most institutions have expansive marketing budgets to promote degree programs by targeted advertising to potential students. However, in this study only one student (5%) of the population discovered The University by some form of target marketing/research. 95% (19/20) of the participants were recruited through organic methods (relationship referrals or reputation).

Figure 4.2 represents the percentages of both organic and inorganic university introductions that led to student enrollments.

Figure 4.2

Chart Reflecting University Student Introductions

UNIVERSITY INTRODUCTION

5% RESEARCH/TARGETED MARKETING

20% REPUTATION

75% REFERRAL
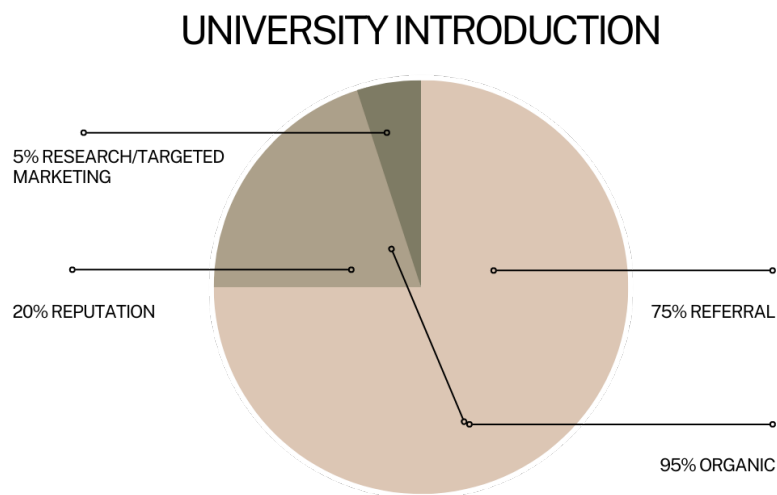
95% ORGANIC

This study also indicated there was a strong correlation between student satisfaction and institutional reputation and the likelihood for future student admissions, as indicated in Table 4.2. Organic measures of recruitment provided a strong foundation for student growth among this group of participants. Whereas research and marketing alone yielded a small percentage of students. The contrast between the two methods provides a foundation on which to base future recruiting methods and marketing. For The University, an investment into alumni relationship building could be key to enrollment growth, as many of the alumni either return for other programs or refer friends, family, and colleagues.

Revisiting the Research Questions

The initial research questions were based on assumptions that I have developed as an academic advisor, faculty member, and university administrator who provided direct and indirect support to nontraditional students over the last nine years in the online environment. It also considered student feedback, prior experience in financial aid and admissions, and an overall

climate change in the higher education landscape since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The

questions considered the model of student progress implemented at The University that emerged

from those assumptions. While graduate students were also served by this particular model,

undergraduate students are the focus in this particular study due to the emphasis placed on

bachelor's degrees as a gateway for continuing education and career advancement.

RQ1 How have the relationships built within the university influenced the overall student experience?

While this was this question was the foundation of the research, it is supported by each of

the subsequent research questions. All of the students attributed part of their success to the

culture of co-learning and community that The University online program provided. Over half

(16/20) of the students remarked that the online environment provided more interaction and

communication than traditional brick-and-mortar institutions or even The University on-ground

campuses. The relationships they built fostered not only success and persistence but engagement,

empowerment, and trust. Half (10/20) of the participants had one or two negative experiences,

but each of them stated that they were served appropriately and swiftly when they voiced their

concerns. Further, they voiced concerns only because the relationships they had formed provided

them the security and trust to do so.

RQ1a Are there relationships outside of faculty and/or advisors being built?

The data from the research showed that 17 of the 20 participants built relationships inside

and outside of the classroom. While the most common bonds were between learner-faculty and

learner-advisor, there was evidence that learner-learner and learner-staff (financial aid, disability

support, admissions) relationships were also formed. Three participants remarked that they had

formed lasting relationships with other students that have persisted past graduation. Eight

participants mentioned relationships with faculty, advisors, or staff that stemmed beyond the classroom. Some examples of those relationships include: (a) check-ins via email, social media, or Zoom, (b) mentorships, (c) letters of recommendation, (d) writing or other creative opportunities being shared, and (e) in person visits/contacts outside of the normal classroom environment. All participants mentioned feeling connected or heard outside of the classroom.

RQ2 Do university relationships and culture play a role in student engagement, persistence and overall success?

As evidenced in the individual student stories, the study found that all 20 participants had both relationships built within the university and overall success. While not all students persisted within their initial timeline, all of them have either completed, will be completing at the end of Spring 2023 semester, or have made significant progress toward their degrees despite conflicting priorities.

RQ3 How do university relationships with students influenced the likelihood of students continuing their education either with the same institution or with another?

Perhaps the most valuable data of the study came from the data regarding enrollment into other university programs. As shown in Table 4.2 and Figure 4.1, there is overwhelming evidence that students who have quality support and authentic relationships and/or experiences are likely to continue their education. Furthermore, students are more likely to continue into internal programs rather than seeking external enrollment opportunities. While several participants are undecided on their plans or chose other institutions, all of them are either considering returning to The University or attended elsewhere due to program offerings. This further suggests that university relationships do in fact have an impact on continuing and future enrollments.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND FUTURE PRACTICE

Student service and ultimately student success are ambiguous and messy work. There is

no one-size-fits-all approach that can determine a student's likelihood to persist or depart,

because humans are relational creatures that do things based on emotions. Institutions often

separate the students and the data to track trends, which can lead to investments of time and

capital into systems that aren't always successful in capturing the human experience and

emotional connections. Pillay and Reynold (2014) found that there is no "one-size-fits-all

approach" to online or blended learning and institutions must be flexible to keep students

engaged.

This research shows that student success is also relational. Traxler (2018) theorized a

similar observation about the online student success and teaching stating, that there is:

> no simple conclusion, only a more complete understanding of a fluid, partial and complex
> environment which education, including distance learning, cannot operate in ignorance or
> isolation. The practical conclusions must come from the providers, the funders, the
> managers and the trainers of distance learning, to think through this abstract conclusion to
> their individual programmes, institutions and responsibilities. (Traxler, 2018, p. 98)

All of the participants interviewed described in detail the way a person, a class, or the institution

made them feel. Most of them remarked that they didn't feel like a number and that they felt they

had been heard and seen. While institutions must make plans to promote student success,

traditional surveying of students is not the answer. Surveying is voluntary and is numbers driven

rather than human centered. The work is fluid and can only be done with the student story at the

forefront of decision-making.

Institutions also need to make sure they are listening to the student voice. Traxler (2018)

also theorized that institutions should "remain open and understanding" to the changing climate

of online/distance learning (p. 1). Without that openness and willingness to extract understanding

from "socio-economic and cultural or cognitive and physiological" student needs they risk an opportunity to empower students and reach them on a deeper level (Traxler, 2018, p. 1). Listening to the tone of what students are saying and not listening simply for what will fit what they already know. The nature of these wider contexts does however mean a shift in institutional culture and online teaching is needed to reach the deeper level.

Faculty vs. Staff vs. the University

Traditional university culture has placed an enormous amount of pressure on the faculty/instructor to create strategies for student success within the classroom, as noted throughout this study. However, as the findings from Chapter III suggest, overall faculty interaction and feedback are important markers for success, but collective ownership of other university staff also have significant influence on persistence and completion in online learning environments. This shift in collective thinking allows for multiple stakeholders to take ownership of the overall student journey rather than placing all of the responsibility on faculty/instructor-learner engagement.

In a qualitative study conducted by Mbati (2012) on the "best practices for the setting up and maintaining of a conducive environment for social constructivist online learning," several key themes were revealed that support this research study (p. 203). The study suggests that instructors were the gateway to overall student success:

> The role of the instructor in developing a conducive on-line learning environment cannot be over emphasized, as the driver of the learning experience from its inception through making sure the participants have adequate skills in using online learning technology, and throughout the learning process by guiding the process, stimulating constructivist learning and providing prompt feedback and assessment. (Mbati, 2012, p. 116)

However, Mbati (2012) also suggests that proper training and empowerment at all levels of the university allow for true a social constructivist environment. Mbati's work and the work of

Ruben (2004) support a change in traditional theory and culture to move toward an inclusive environment for all voices.

Throughout the research process participants remarked "I could tell that they loved the work they were doing" in relation to faculty and/or staff members. In contrast, comments also reflected that they could tell when faculty or staff weren't satisfied, because they could feel it in their interactions. Faculty are often held responsible for student satisfaction and persistence; however, this study found that faculty are secondary to the student journey if advisors or other mentors are present. Several participants noted that there were hegemonic undertones in the communication received from faculty. In each of those interactions the students felt they were being punished or even ostracized after the communication ended. Some of them reached out to their advisor to change degree plans or withdraw from the course, while others stayed but didn't fully engage in the content. And while they are secondary, institutions continue to promote faculty voice over the voices of the student success teams or, more importantly, the students.

Fletcher's (2007) work on mentoring adult (nontraditional) learners supports both the findings of this research and researcher assumptions of shifting university culture.

> Mentoring relationships constitute one such context that can help those involved to realize their potential… Integrating self-study action research into mentoring enables mentor and mentee to undertake sustained and systematic inquiry into their development. This in turn enables them to understand the changes that they have initiated and offers insights regarding the creation of more. If it is to stand a chance of bringing about constructive and life-enhancing transformation, mentoring cannot thrive in an organizational vacuum. It must be embedded as a central premise on which the organization is founded and runs on a daily basis... Mentoring must be accorded sufficient creative space, time, and status. Mentors need support from other mentors for sustaining their professional development. The pump-priming system (one or two intensive mentor training days) is not sufficient in itself to engender a culture in which employees can have ongoing meaningful professional development opportunities. (p. 76)

Fletcher theorized that higher education mentors or, in the context of this research, student support/success stakeholders outside of the classroom must have room to be reflective and it

must be built in the university hierarchy. Those mentoring relationships are integral to employee

compliance/satisfaction and in turn foster a university culture with student success at the

forefront.

In addition, the transformational nature of the authentic relationships further supports

empowerment at all levels of the university as well as discovery of better selves (Fletcher, 2007).

Bruner's constructivist theory reinforces this type of structure by theorizing: "We have become

so preoccupied with the more formal criteria of "performance" and with the bureaucratic

demands of education as an institution that we have neglected this personal side of education"

(Bruner, 1996, p. 39). In order to serve students, universities must first address internal practices

that hinder employee (stakeholder) commitment to overall institutional and student success.

Model for Holistic Success

Kember's (1989) model references Tinto's (1975) earlier model for student departure and

seeks to address nontraditional and distance learning within that framework. However, both

models are outdated in practice and in principle especially since the COVID-19 pandemic and

the technological advances made in online and face-to-face learning. However, Tinto's model

did place emphasis on social construction of knowledge and intellectual connection to content

that this study found to be integral to student success. Kember's model addressed distance

learning on the basis of several factors including individual student characteristics,

goal/motivations, academic environment, social/work environment, academic integration,

social/work integration, and finally cost-benefit analysis (Kember, 1989, p. 286). The research

from this study found that while those factors exist within the new conceptual model created,

how they interact varies significantly. Whereas Kember places less emphasis in the areas of

environment and social or co-learning and more emphasis on outside characteristics and

motivations, this study found the opposite. Social or authentic relationships and the culture of support built within the academic environment itself were more likely to increase student persistence. In addition, in all of the participant interviews, cost-benefit analysis was considered as an indicator or hinderance of success. The lack cost-benefit consideration in participants could be because of the rate of referrals and/or reputation of the university being the main indicator of admission.

The new proposed model for student success (as shown in Figure 4.3) uses university relationships and student success at the intersection of authentic engagement, communication, collective ownership, and human centeredness. All four prongs form a circular structure of student support and are dependent on one another for fostering relationships and student success. Each of the prongs shares the same importance in regards to their impact on students success; however, they should be used simultaneously for quantifiable and qualitative results.

Figure 4.3

Diagram of the Research Proposed Structural Model
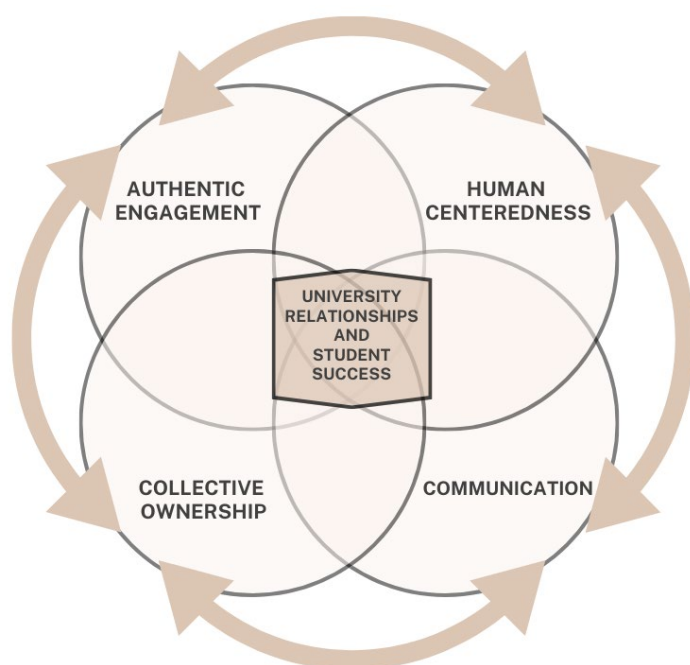
While Green et al. (2017) studied the impacts of cultural communication in online graduate programs, their findings are can be applied to undergraduate programming as indicated by this research. They found that social connections and relationships inside and outside of the classroom do improve overall student success and persistence and lead to a decrease in attrition.

To further support listening and hearing, authentic engagement, human centeredness, communication, and collective ownership in online learning Ergün and Avcı's (2018) study on knowledge-sharing behavior reinforces a reciprocal (receiving and giving) relationship building opportunities in the classroom and beyond. While the sharing of knowledge is a "complex and time-consuming process," and can be hindered by "human-related or technical-related factors," it must be present to have a framework of student success built on co-construction of knowledge, belonging, and community (Ergün & Avcı, 2018, p. 60)

University and Student Outcomes

Kahu's (2013) study theorized that behavioral, psychological, sociocultural, and holistic approaches to teaching and learning should be considered to create a learning environment supportive of the social constructivist framework and quality outcomes. The work of Kahu (2013), Tinto (1975), and Kember (1989) provide credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to this research and proposed model for student success (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). A relational structure emerged from the model (Figure 4.4) and research data that demonstrates the likely student and university outcomes. As shown in Figure 4.4 the student and university overlap the four-pronged model framework to produce favorable outcomes for the student and the university.

Figure 4.4

Diagram of the Research Structural Model With Outcomes
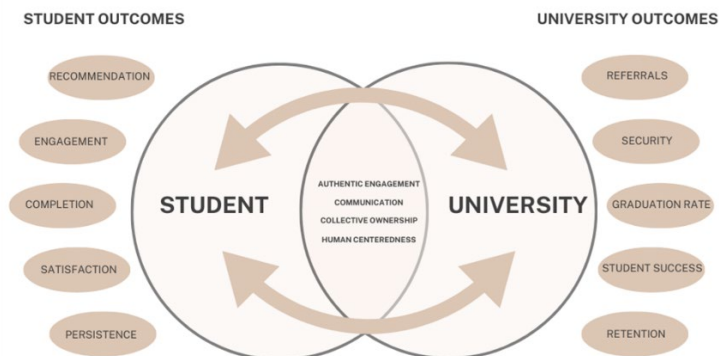
Centner's (2014) reflection on student engagement and Calhoun et al.'s (2017) work on successful distance education programming further supported this research study and proposed structural model in that special attention and effort must be put into the online environment to foster engagement and success. Support should not only be built into the classroom activities to promote learner-content connectedness but also outside the classroom to promote learner-university and university-staff links. These connections of support to content and in turn support to learner allow for authenticity and overall engagement and produce quality outcomes benefiting the institutional community (Centner, 2014).

Literature Trends and Professional Practice

Shackelford and Maxwell's (2012) study posits that learner-learner interaction is just as important as learner-instructor interaction. However, this research found that even in cases where learner-learner interaction didn't extend beyond the classroom, the learner-instructor or learner-staff interactions served as a sufficient relationship-building opportunity for success. In this study, active participation and collaboration from faculty, staff, and/or other students was the main determinant of student persistence. While a sense of community is important, the

community can be represented without learner-learner interaction outside of the classroom. Further, Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) concluded that "learner–learner, learner–instructor, and learner–content interaction function in an inter-dependent manner, with each potentially contributing to and benefiting from the others as students and instructor participate in an online learning environment" (p. 229). Their research is based on a community of inquiry (CoI) model where three elements are present: "cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence" (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012, p. 230). Despite some differences in Shackelford and Maxwell's theory and this study, two intersectionalities can be found: the need for some social construction of knowledge and the need for building authentic "real" community and relationships for student success to occur (p. 231).

Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2016) also used the CoI model to look into student-perceived learning in both synchronous and asynchronous course. They concluded that social presence, teaching presence, and as well as cognitive presence were needed to produce effective online learning environments (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). To achieve this circular structure universities must invest in the proper training for instructors and course design for optimal results.

Koper's (2015) study of students enrolled in online programs, potential online students, and a target group of online students with specific programs proposed that student preferences change based on where they are in the enrollment process as well as what major that they choose. The data from Koper's study broke down results into the top five preference profiles (from 32) (Koper, 2015, p. 320–321). The profiles include "collaboration versus self-study, pacing versus flexibility, practical orientation versus theoretical orientation, proactive versus reactive teaching and in-depth versus superficial learning" (Koper, 2015, p. 325). The most common preference

from all three groups accounted for active classroom collaboration and community with a flexible pace. While self-study was preferential over group work in most of the participants sets, active learning in the classroom where learner-instructor and learner-learner interactions occurred was the preferred method overall. Moreover, this study supports the notion that while online learning and co-construction of knowledge and opportunities for active participation are preferred, flexibility and freedom is the predilection among most online learners.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

While the research provided qualitative and quantifiable data, there are limitations that the researcher recognizes. This study was completed at one not-for-profit degree completion institution with a focus on undergraduate students. While some of the participants had advanced into graduate degrees, questioning was not directly related to future programming. In addition, the researcher used their own assumptions and model as a co-constructer of the research. However, because professional practice is a requirement for this doctoral research some assumptions and modeling allowed the study to be rooted in both experience and new research. Within the framework of social constructivism and narrative inquiry co-learning and storying are integral to the research process.

Equally, transformative learning and modeling are not always successful. Some students thrive in an environment of self-actualization, realization, and creativity, but others find it difficult to navigate because it can be ambiguous. However, the model here is transformative while also being highly interactive and personalized. Traditional culture has placed too much emphasis on rules and regulations as safety net, which can prohibit breaking free from traditional modeling to transform institutions to the learning experience into an opportunity for creating future change (Cranton, 2016).

There are also opportunities for future research that should be acknowledged as part of the study. To expand the validity of the findings, interviewing students in two-year associate programs, graduate programs, and doctoral programs would be beneficial. In addition, application of the same research questions to other types of institutions would provide intersectionalities and differences that would be valuable to this model and the overall research. Finally, interviewing faculty and staff at The University and honoring their stories would be instrumental in determining other variables as stakeholders in student success and their needs, motivations, and strategies for success.

Recommendations for Reimaging University Culture

From this research several recommendations for future practice have emerged as possible ways to promote student success, persistence, completion, and empowerment while considering this model. The first recommendation is for universities to consider new ways of surveying student populations. In order to address student motivations and overall persistence and completion strategies, student voice should be heard. Traditional surveying diminishes the student story and voice. In order to honor authenticity, I propose that universities complete student service interviews that can provide both results and emotional authentic connections from both the university and students.

The second recommendation is to reimagine university structure, in order to have authentic engagement, collective ownership, communication, and human centeredness at the forefront. As a first step to changing university culture and structure, institutions must be willing to promote the empowerment of their employees and students. This could mean additional professional development, inclusion of isolated departments, employing a university-wide

teacher culture, and a return to providing personalized service by investing in advising/mentor outside of the classroom.

Last, changing curriculum to include opportunities for asynchronous and/or synchronous interactions. While asynchronous learning provides flexibility, it can be isolating. To address that isolation, touchpoints should be established with students throughout their program. Having faculty post weekly lectures/videos in the classroom, providing virtual office hours for key staff (registrar, student services, etc.), holding office hours with consideration to time zones and/or allowing students to book appointments at their convenience, allowing freedom to demonstrate learning, and sending written personalized correspondence. As stated in Leslie (2021), revising classroom practices by allowing students freedom in demonstrating knowledge is key to increased motivation in students. Further, by allowing freedom in the classroom students are able to increase communication touchpoints with instructors and staff to plan individualized learning. Humanizing the online experience by investing in learning and relationship building is crucial to this model.

Conclusion

Brookfield (2005) powerfully wrote, "The agent who facilitates this finding of authentic voice, the leader on the trek of aural discovery is, of course, the teacher" (p. 328). The teacher, in relation to the model proposed in this study, is anyone who provides support to the students. Furthermore, this research study was built on a foundation rooted in holistic learning that supports active listening from both student and the collective university stakeholders, which in turn provides opportunities for growth, validation, and optimized co-learning.

The idea that personal experiences and authentic voice, as Brookfield mentions, shape our future learning is true, but as Collins (2019) states, "the idea of community provided an

essential connection between ideas and social structures. But the idea of community was also a construct of hope" (p. 187). Community is what can form common bonds and help build the hope needed for social justice change. Community is a tool, but without really considering it as part of the modeling for institutional change universities won't be able to shift to the culture needed for optimized student success.

Moreover, it is the recommendation of the researcher that in order to bring students out of their comfort zones to explore learning as creative inquiry that fostered growth and encouraged self-actualization, students must feel seen and heard. Students, faculty, and staff who are given permission to be themselves without emphasis on policies, rules, and regulations foster a culture of trust throughout the university (Cranton, 2016).

Educators often find themselves "striving for, as an example, equity in our classrooms and schools, but often failing to genuinely interact with each other (and our institutions and systems) in ways that support this goal" because there is little room for meaningful relationships and conversations (Zacko-Smith & Pritchy Smith, 2010, p. 2). As an educational practitioner and professional, this model was created as a multifaceted approach to student engagement and learning that includes communication, authentic engagement, collective ownership, and human centeredness that has been shaped from ongoing interactions and relationships built with students and colleagues. These four key components work together to form a holistic learning and engagement strategy grounded in personal and professional growth. This study accounts for all four principles through one-on-one interaction, group interaction, validation, and value specific teaching and learning. Each interaction with students or colleagues provides a layer of foundation to my work and contributes to my evolving plan of action for future research and modeling.

To close, I feel it necessary to return to my initial inspiration as a scholar-practitioner who wants to create change in higher education. Dewey and Freire have provided foundational knowledge to my practice while empowering me to think creatively in regards to student success. Dewey states that "sound educational experience involves, above all, continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learned" (Dewey, 1997, p. 10). If institutions of learning could think of Dewey's theory as a compassionate decision toward the betterment of the students they serve, it could further social justice, empowerment of the students they serve, and learning as whole.

Dewey also says: "it is, then, a sound instinct which identifies freedom with power to frame purposes and to execute or carry into effect purposes so framed. Such freedom is in turn identical with self-control; for the formation of purposes and the organization of means to execute them are the work of intelligence" (Dewey, 1997, p. 28). Imagine if institutional stakeholders began to think of themselves as students of Dewey's practices for a moment. Would they prefer traditional education or progressive education that focuses on individualized practices? Perhaps if educators were given options, opportunities, and the freedom to express their own values/ideals, then they would begin to understand the importance of small changes making lasting impacts.

Additionally, Freire and Bergman (2014) posits that "the solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves' (p. 74). Education is emotional, challenging, and it is the institutional responsibility to foster a culture inside and outside of the classrooms where it is safe for transformations of mind, body, and soul to occur. That culture creates not only change but an

opportunity for student voices to be truly heard and their stories to be honored because the

university is finally listening.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

10/31/2022

Dear Liz Carson-Murphy,

As Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Antioch University, I am letting you know that the committee has reviewed your Ethics Application. Based on the information presented in your Ethics Application, your study has been approved.

Your study has been approved for Exempt status by the IRB. As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record. While your project does not require continuing review, it is your responsibility to inform the IRB if the procedures presented in this protocol are to be modified or if problems related to human research participants arise in connection with this project. Any procedural modifications must be evaluated by the IRB before being implemented, as some modifications may change the review status of this project. Please be reminded that even though your study is exempt from the relevant federal regulations of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46, subpart A), you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your project.

Sincerely,

Hays Moulton

IRB Chair Antioch University

Consent to Participate in Institutional Research

Researcher Name: Elizabeth (Liz) Carson-Murphy

Title of Study: Building University Relationships: A Holistic to Student Success and Advising in Online Learning Environments.

Introduction

My name is Liz Carson-Murphy and I am a doctoral student at Antioch University. I am conducting research focused student success in online learning environments with emphasis on relationship building. This form is to provide you with information regarding the research study and your rights at a research participant. Please read all the information before deciding to participate.

This consent form may contain words or concepts that are unfamiliar to you. If you are unsure about the meaning of any of the terminology or ideas, please feel free to ask me any questions that you may have as we go through the information. If you have questions at any time during the research process, you can ask them of me or my dissertation committee chair, Cristy Sugarman, xxxxxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of holistic approaches to student success in online learning environments through university relationships. Specifically, building

relationships with advisors, staff or faculty that leads to increased communication, engagement, and overall persistence. It will also touch on the importance of a university wide teacher culture in online learning environments. The study will seek to find connections in mutual vulnerability, storytelling, and the narratives of research subjects to address student success strategies in online higher education learning environments. The goal for this research and study is to advance student success and empowerment through the use of your stories and experiences.

This research will be conducted through a series of 1-3 semi-structured interviews that will last approximately 30-90 minutes in length.

You are being invited to participate in this research study because you have met the criteria based on the qualifying questionnaire and opted in to the research.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may opt out of the study at any time.

Procedures

To participate in the study, you are agreeing to take part in a series of interviews with me. We will be meeting via the zoom platform to conduct the interviews. If you prefer another format of interview we can discuss alternative options. During the meetings only, you (the subject) and I (the researcher) will be present. Each interview will be recorded so that it can be transcribed (you can request a copy of your meeting if you wish). During our meetings, I will ask you a series of questions to explore your educational experiences, the impact of those experiences, and the meaning you attribute to those experiences. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may opt out of the question. You may also ask to end or pause the

meeting at any time. The recordings and transcripts of the interviews will be stored on my password-protected personal computer using password-protected files.

Duration

The research will take place over a three to four-month period of time. During that time, I will interview you one to three times with each interview taking approximately 30 to 90 minutes. Times during that period will be at your convenience. It is possible that you will only be interviewed one time.

Risks

The interviews will ask you to recall your educational experiences. That will require sharing of personal information, perspectives, and exploration of feelings and emotions. While the questions themselves are not meant to evoke emotional responses follow up questions and/or recollections may elicit some significant experiences and/or stories during your educational journey that are highly emotional. You may opt out of questions, move on to other questions, ask for a break, or end the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefit(s) to you. However, your participation is important to understand student success through your personal experience and stories. Student stories are unique and by listening to student stories we can gain insights into the experiences of other students and hopefully begin to understand how relationships contribute to student success in online environments.

Compensation

You will not be provided any incentive (monetary or otherwise) to take part in the research study.

Confidentiality

I will not be sharing identifying information about you in the research study. The information that I collect from this research project will be kept completely confidential. All written materials will refer to you by a pseudonym instead of your name. Information about your identity will not be shared with anyone, including my doctoral committee, without your prior written consent. (You can consent to have your identity shared if you so choose)

Data Storage and Retention

As stated previously the video files and transcripts of our interviews will be stored on my personal laptop, which is password protected in a password-protected folder. Only I will have access to these stored files. The files of the recordings will remain stored in a password-protected folder on my personal computers for a period of one year after the completion of my research or graduation from the program (whichever comes first). The files will be named "Building University Relationships.PSEUDONYM". Once the period of one year has passed all files will be permanently deleted.

Sharing the Results

The findings of the research will only be shared as part of my published dissertation and any work related to dissertation presentations including but not limited to conferences, symposiums, and presentations. Your information will remain private unless you sign a waiver/consent form stating otherwise.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

You may choose not to take part in this research study or opt out at any time. Choosing not to participate or opting out during the research process will not affect your educational endeavors in any way. You will be given the opportunity before the final draft and publication process to

review and make comments. You will be able to ask for amendments or removal of portions of the research in which you participated in before it is final.

Contact Persons

For Questions Related to the Dissertation Process or General Questions:

1. Cristy Sugarman, Dissertation Chair: xxxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx

2. Angel Martinez, Dissertation Committee Member: xxxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx

3. Jonathan Eskridge, Dissertation Committee Member: xxxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx

For IRB Questions:

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact:

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by the Antioch University Institutional Review Board (IRB),which is a committee whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to find out more about the IRB, contact Antioch University IRB Chairperson Hays Moulton at xxxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx

Part II: Certificate of Consent

I have read all of the information provided (or it has been read to me). I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and/or all questions or concerns about the study have been addressed. I consent to be voluntarily be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Part III: Researcher Statement

I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been

given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher: _____

Signature of Researcher _____

Date _____

APPENDIX C: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Qualifying Questionnaire:

1. Have you been enrolled in and completed coursework in the The University's 100% online bachelor's degree program in the past 3 years?

2. What was the title of the degree you were pursuing?

3. Your age at time of enrollment:

4. Did you complete a transition/orientation course or interdisciplinary core writing course?

5. Did you meet with an advisor and/or faculty member at least once via phone or zoom to form an academic plan, career plan or other future plan?

6. Where did you live while you were enrolled in this program?

7. Are you a U.S. citizen?

Based on your responses, if you qualify for the rest of this study, please indicate if you are willing to participate in a 60-minute remote (zoom), recorded video interview with the researcher to discuss the relationships built during your time at Antioch, your overall academic experience, outside factors (work, family, etc.), and/or any challenges you experienced. There may also be a follow-up interview to be conducted later by video call not to last more than 30 minutes to clarify your answers and ask follow up questions. The interview video call will take place at a time and place convenient to you and your identity will remain confidential. All interview

protocols are conducted under the protocols of the Antioch University Institutional Review

Board (https://irb.antioch.edu/index.html).

_____Yes, I would be interested in participating in a video interview and follow-up web call.

Name: _____

Email address: _____

Re-enter your email address: _____

_____No, I am not interested in participating in the study at this time.

If you qualify and indicate that, you would be interested in the face-to-face interview and follow

up, I will send you a follow-up email in the next few weeks.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration of this project,

Liz Carson-Murphy

Antioch University

EdD Doctoral Candidate

xxx-xxx-xxxx

xxxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx

APPENDIX D: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW

Dear [Student],

As a current or former student of Antioch University Distance and Extended Education and having completed INTD-3000 Empowering Your Purpose and Voice, you are being invited to participate in my dissertation research study. I am currently working on my doctorate in the Antioch University EdD program.

The dissertation study involves interviewing former students to better understand the needs of students and the relationships built during your time at Antioch, your overall academic experience, outside factors (work, family, etc.), and/or any challenges you experienced.

This study complies with and has been approved by the Institutional Review Boards Antioch University. Your participation in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Should you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that you choose. No matter what decision you make, there will be no penalty to you. Your decision will not affect your present or future relationship with Antioch University.

The interview will take approximately 60 minutes depending on how much one shares. The interview will be audio recorded; the recording will be used to create a transcript of the interview. The transcript will be used for data analysis. The audio recording and transcript will not be shared with anyone, are for my research purposes only, and will be stored in a password protected computer file. Participant names will not be included in the formal record, so as to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

If you are interested in participating, please reply to this email indicating you would like to participate. You will then receive an email to schedule the interview. If you have any

questions about this project, you may contact me at the email address or telephone number

below. Thank you for your consideration.

Kind regards,

Liz Carson-Murphy

Antioch University

EdD Doctoral Candidate

xxx-xxx-xxxx

 xxxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you share what made you decide to enroll in an online degree completion program?

2. What made you decide to enroll in the university you chose?

3. What was your motivation and/or goals for returning to school?

   a. Did anyone talk about that with you as came into the program?

4. Did you feel "heard" in your interactions with faculty and staff?

   a. If so can you give examples?

5. In online learning environments, it is often difficult to feel authenticity and connection. Did you ever experience examples of that in your interactions with students, faculty, or anyone else?

6. During your time at the university, did you ever experience any hardships where you felt like someone at the university helped and supported in a way that really stood out to you?

7. Did you ever feel like there were times that you were not supported, heard or valued?

   a. If so can you give examples?

8. Did you feel as if you received the same level of service with each department and/or staff member you emailed, spoke to, or met?

   a. Please explain.

9. Looking back, do you think that the relationships you built or the services you received were integral to your success?

10. Did you or do you plan on continuing your education beyond your bachelor's degree?

    a. Please explain.

11. Would you like to add anything else that you feel is important to note about your journey or story?