

UNDERSTANDING FACULTY PERCEPTION OF COMPLETELY ASYNCHRONOUS
AND SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE EDUCATION ON STUDENT RETENTION AT
COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA: A HERMENEUTIC
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE FACULTY ONLINE EDUCATION
EXPERIENCE

by

Sally Ann Mercer

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

Amy Schechter, Ph. D., Committee Chair

Matthew Ozolnieks, Ed.D., Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand completely online education's impact on student retention for faculty at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. The theory guiding this study was Michael G. Moore's transactional distance theory, which centers on three components of online education—structure, communication, and student autonomy. The literature review revealed these factors, and their relevant sub-factors all influence faculty's experience and knowledge of the factors that impact student retention. The central research question for this study was as follows: What are faculty's perceptions of completely asynchronous and synchronous education at community colleges in western Pennsylvania? This study employed a purposive sample of faculty at three community colleges. Three data-collection methods were used: semi-structured individual interviews with 11 faculty, a focus group at each institution, and a review of 33 documents. Max Van Manen's data-analysis process for hermeneutic phenomenological studies was used to analyze the collected data and generate the results. The results generated three themes and 10 subthemes. Theme one was preparedness with subthemes lack of student readiness, faculty readiness for online teaching, and student engagement. Theme two was community with subthemes faculty acting in loco parentis, communication is paramount, faculty vs. administration input, and data for decision-making. Theme three was lack of access with subthemes impacts of COVID-19, ability to pivot, and lack of infrastructure. The themes and subthemes provide answers to the central research question as well as all three sub-research questions.

Keywords: retention, asynchronous, synchronous, community college, western Pennsylvania, higher education, faculty

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God—who provides me with everything that I need, who strengthens me, who protects me, who sees me through—and to all the family, friends, and faculty who helped me achieve my goals.

Acknowledgments

Without the continued support and direction of my dissertation committee and all the faculty who helped me to understand what I needed to understand to develop a meaningful dissertation, my success would not have been possible. Throughout my doctoral program, I experienced six life-changing challenges within two years. It was only through the support, patience, guidance, and encouragement of the faculty I was blessed with having for my courses that I completed my dissertation and doctoral program.

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List of Abbreviations

Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)

Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS)

Bridging the Gaps – Pittsburgh (BTG-Pittsburgh)

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP)

Learning Management System (LMS)

Massive, Open, Online Course (MOOC)

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS88)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The last decade has seen a rapid decline in student retention at institutions of higher education in the United States (Cantor, 2019; Caruth, 2018; Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017). This decline has devastated the financial stability of many institutions, so identifying its causes is crucial to ensure their continued viability (Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018; Simons et al., 2020; Wolinsky, 2020). The community colleges in western Pennsylvania are not immune to this trend and have struggled in recent years to halt the attrition of students; however, limited efforts have been made thus far to address the core factors behind why students leave. The attrition rate has significant implications for higher education institutions, but it also has an economic and growth-related impact on individual students, faculty, and the regions in which the institutions operate (Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018; Simons et al., 2020; Wolinsky, 2020).

Faculty with substantial experience in completely online education modalities have significant insight into student effort, success, and persistence. Thus, this study assessed the perceptions of these faculty on student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. In this manner, it details the background of the shared lived experiences of completely online modalities as well as their historical, social, and theoretical contexts (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Mec et al., 2020; Reyes et al., 2019; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020). This study's analysis of the lived experiences of faculty revealed themes that provide faculty-perceived answers regarding the problem of student retention.

Background

This qualitative study is intended to provide insight into faculty perceptions of completely online education and student retention, both of which impact higher education institutions (Aucejo et al., 2020; Dominguez-Figaredo et al., 2022). Community colleges in western Pennsylvania are struggling with student retention and the evolving needs of modern students (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Marchante, 2020; Sousa, 2021; Sullivan, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020). Therefore, it is critical to understand the background of the student retention problem and determine whether it is impacted in any way—positively or negatively—by the implementation of entirely online teaching and learning practices. Research on student retention has covered many factors, including student perceptions, the operations of higher education institutions, and uncontrollable extraneous factors (e.g., Alexandru-Comin, 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020; Caruth, 2018; Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Dominguez-Figaredo et al., 2022); however, there is a notable dearth of research on perceptions of both online education and student retention among faculty. Recent research has demonstrated the need for continued efforts to understand and focus on facets of higher education in order for institutions to continue to survive in the modern learning environment—and student retention and online learning modalities are two of the most important facets (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Heilporn et al., 2021; Mec et al., 2020; Sweany et al., 2020). Empirical research is critical to addressing this gap in the literature; the collection of data and the development of strategies to address areas of concern for institutions of higher education, like the community colleges in western Pennsylvania, are vital for these institutions to continue to thrive.

Historical Context

Student retention has been a concern among higher education institutions for the last decade and has only grown in significance, especially since the global COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Caruth, 2018; Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Loyd & Eckhardt, 2010; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Mooney & Francis, 2018). The need to facilitate social distancing in education during the pandemic and the need to keep pace with advancing technologies and new choices offered to students have made distance education an increasingly necessary offering for higher education institutions (Alexandru-Comin, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020). The evolving global landscape has forced businesses across all sectors, including academia, to adapt and provide what the current market demands. Through time, the use of online forums to educate students at community colleges has gone from something new and uncertain to a critical tool to remain competitive and provide educational options to modern students (Baier & Kunter, 2020; Marchante, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic required many higher education institutions to pivot quickly to continue to deliver instruction online, and this pivot generally went fairly well all things considered. However, retention remains a concern. While these institutions have adapted to meet students' evolving needs while continuing to provide high-quality education, some factors—most notably insufficient enrollment and retention rates—continue to plague them. Consulting the knowledge and experiences of faculty may offer some insight into the reasons why students do not persist in their studies. Faculty who are experienced in delivering online modalities have valuable knowledge regarding student engagement and success; however, there is a paucity of research that has actively sought out such insight from faculty in online academic settings

(Heilporn et al., 2021; Mec et al., 2020; Narang et al., 2022; Saqlain, 2021; Thomas & Chukhlomin, 2020; Wood, 2020).

Social Context

Beyond the community colleges in western Pennsylvania as well as all of their students and employees, this research has the potential to benefit the general educational landscape. Higher education institutions have the power to change lives and, in turn, to impact the communities in which they operate. Ensuring that students complete their degree programs leads them to greater career opportunities, which then provides employers with a larger labor supply both locally and globally; it facilitates the development of an educated community to produce future leaders. Evidently, not understanding the many influential factors behind student retention—including completely online teaching modalities—has far-reaching implications.

In western Pennsylvania, student tuition is a primary source of income for community colleges, so a decline in student retention leads to financial constraints that impact their operations (Baier & Kunter, 2020; Marchante, 2020). The students at these colleges are also citizens of the areas in which they reside; if a student does not complete their degree program for any reason, it has a potentially significant impact on that student's employability and the financial stability of their family in the future. This issue of declining student retention must be studied to strategize about improving retention and improving the lives of students (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Heilporn et al., 2021; Mec et al., 2020; Sweany et al., 2020). With rising demand for technological adaptation and flexibility in educational programs, community colleges must invest time and effort into the development of online programs to meet the needs of their students and improve their student retention rates (Liu et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2021).

Companies, whether local or global, all need to hire educated, competent employees. Without successful education and degree completion, many students who do not persist will struggle to meet companies' employment needs, which has far-reaching economic implications for western Pennsylvania as a whole. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the worlds of both education and work have changed. Many students have multiple things demanding their time and attention at any given time demands on them at the same time, demands that simply were not there prior to the pandemic. Beyond concerns about employment and education, students struggle with worries about the mental health, safety, and well-being of both themselves and their families (Alexandru-Comin, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic not only changed the face of higher education but also changed and continues to change how we function in the world. Students who are now facing copious new challenges in life need mechanisms that encourage and help them to persist (Alexandru-Comin, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020). These students will be those who go on to become leaders, be they business, political, or community leaders.

Theoretical Context

Student retention at community colleges in the United States has been on a steady decline for the past ten years, with that trend becoming particularly dramatic within the last five years (Caruth, 2018; Fresen, 2018; Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Loyd & Eckhardt, 2010; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Mooney & Francis, 2018; O'Hara & Sparrow, 2019; Rosen, 2021; Shea & Bidjerano, 2019; Wolinsky, 2020). This dramatic decline in student retention has a rippling impact on higher education institutions and, in turn, their communities, their local economies, and, ultimately, their students (Davis et al., 2019; Loyd &

Eckhardt, 2010; Muller et al., 2020; Rands et al., 2021; Rosen, 2021). While student retention has been researched to develop strategies to reverse the trend, most of the research has focused on just a few areas; little empirical research has been aimed at understanding faculty perspectives, especially as they relate to completely online education and its impact on student retention (Caruth, 2018; Fresen, 2018; Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Loyd & Eckhardt, 2010; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Mooney & Francis, 2018; O'Hara & Sparrow, 2019; Rosen, 2021; Shea & Bidjerano, 2019; Wolinsky, 2020).

The extant literature on student retention is primarily centered on student engagement, course structure, COVID-19-related issues, access to technology, and infrastructural insufficiency, which is conducive to distance education (Caruth, 2018; Duran, 2015; Hart et al., 2021; Heap et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020). While some articles have consulted with faculty to gather information on student persistence and retention, very little has aimed to understand faculty's perception of the impact—be it substantial or insignificant, positive or negative—that completely online education has on student retention.

Student engagement, as discussed in the literature, is essential for students to be academically successful. Positive student engagement indicates that the student is fully active and present for the learning process and is more likely to persist. The extant literature delves into the potential factors behind student engagement as well as the impact of engagement on student learning and persistence—but again, the literature fails to adequately assess faculty perceptions of means of ensuring student engagement and, in turn, student persistence (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022; Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018; Saqlain, 2021; Tomas et al., 2019).

The most frequently identified barriers to student engagement—lack of infrastructure

and access to technology—are generally considered to be linked to socioeconomic status and population density (Roach & Attardi, 2021; Sullivan, 2021). These challenges became even more evident during the global pandemic. COVID-19 and its impact on higher education, including student retention, brought to light the need for better preparedness in terms of training both students and faculty on the use of distance education platforms and learning management systems (Alexandru-Comin, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020). The post-pandemic literature has also importantly highlighted the lack of infrastructure that many students, especially those from under-represented or economically struggling communities, struggle with throughout their education. Ultimately, it brought about a sense of urgency for responding to widespread emergencies that require a quick pivot in teaching and learning modalities.

While the prominent areas of research in the extant literature are relevant to the problem of declining student retention, there is little empirical research that spotlights the lived experiences of distance education among faculty. This study fills that gap in the literature. Faculty have first-hand knowledge of how students perform, what motivates them to learn, how to structure learning for maximum results, and how to successfully impart knowledge to students (Huang et al., 2015; Sousa, 2021). Those who are experienced in completely online teaching and learning have a solid understanding of the most valuable elements for a virtual classroom and can offer valuable insight into the shared lived experience of online teaching and learning modalities and how it influences matters of student retention.

Problem Statement

The problem for this dissertation is that student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania has steadily declined over the past ten years and has declined even more dramatically within the last five (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020). This decline has a significant impact on the individual lives of the students who do not persist in their educational pursuits, their families, the ability of higher education institutions to thrive, and the economies of these institutions' surrounding communities (Davis et al., 2019; Loyd & Eckhardt, 2010; Muller et al., 2020; Rands et al., 2021; Rosen, 2021). There are four community colleges in western Pennsylvania, and the cause(s) of the decline in student retention have yet to be clearly identified (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020).

While student retention is a concern for higher education during times when society is in a normalized state without any kind of apparent crisis, it is far more of an issue in times of considerable challenge, and this has been made plainly apparent (especially for community colleges in western Pennsylvania) in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Aucejo et al., 2020; Seryakova et al., 2022; Sousa, 2021; Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2020). This pandemic forced many higher education institutions, including those in western Pennsylvania, to rapidly adapt to a new paradigm at a time when the entire world was competing for the same resources to maintain its pre-pandemic business operations (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020). To continue to be able to operate successfully amid the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and in future crises, community colleges in western Pennsylvania need to understand the factors that have negatively affected and continue to negatively affect student retention.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of teaching asynchronous and/or synchronous virtual courses for faculty at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. At this stage in the research, completely asynchronous and synchronous education will be defined as any course offered by one of the community colleges in western Pennsylvania that permits a student to complete the course from a remote location. The student does not need to be physically present to fulfill any course requirement. The theory guiding this study is Michael G. Moore's transactional distance theory. The anticipated benefits of this phenomenological study include enhancing the learning environment for students in a way that better encourages student persistence and achieving stabilized operations for higher education institutions through more consistent student retention rates (Moustakas, 1994).

Significance of the Study

This study will greatly inform the literature as to whether asynchronous and/or synchronous online courses may impact student retention. It will provide insight into the declining rates of student retention across the four community colleges in western Pennsylvania, as its participants include relevant faculty at these schools; an understanding of their perceptions will provide a clearer picture of what is needed to bolster student retention. It will also provide data on whether asynchronous or synchronous education impacts student retention. Community colleges are vital to communities, regions, and the county as a whole, as they offer young people—especially those who come from marginalized communities—pathways to their future (Henninger-Voss and Hertzberg, 2017; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; O'Hara & Sparrow, 2019; Saqlain, 2021).

This study, through the lens of Michael G. Moore's transactional distance theory, emphasizes student autonomy, structure, and communication in an attempt to facilitate success in completely online education at community colleges in western Pennsylvania (Falloon, 2011; Moore, 1997; Tugtekin, 2021; Xiaoxia et al., 2015). An understanding of how to increase student autonomy would enable faculty to identify methods with which to build or expand on student autonomy. Empirical research indicates that student engagement is a significant factor behind student autonomy (Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021). Thus, finding ways to increase student engagement is highly likely to simultaneously increase student autonomy. Students with higher levels of autonomy set more education goals, interact more with faculty and their classmates, and have an overall better chance of academic success (Heilporn et al., 2021; Kirchner & Pepper, 2020; Narang et al., 2022; Rosen, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021; Simons et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2021; Swart & MacLeod, 2021; Tugtekin, 2021; Xiaoxia et al., 2015, 2016). The positive online experience also reinforces the positive attributes developed by these students.

During the research process, this study examined faculty perceptions of completely asynchronous and synchronous online education and its impact on student retention. There is a paucity of notable dearth of research in the extant literature on such faculty perceptions, so this study provides a valuable new perspective (Liu et al., 2020; Mec et al., 2020; Wood, 2020). An understanding of faculty perceptions will afford organizations the ability to strategically address both online education and student retention.

The results of this study also have practical significance for the community colleges in western Pennsylvania as well as state, national, and global higher education communities. The issue of declining student retention is far from a dynamic unique to community colleges in

western Pennsylvania. In fact, most colleges and universities in the United States, and beyond are facing the same concerns (Cantor, 2019; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020). Importantly, the failure to address issues with student retention would not only exacerbate the problem of fewer students returning to the classroom (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020), it would also endanger the financial viability of higher education institutions, including the community colleges in western Pennsylvania. Rising demand for online education also constitutes a matter that warrants further examination to ensure that it leads to the highest possible level of student engagement (Baier & Kunter, 2020; Dominguez-Figaredo et al., 2022). Students today have diverse needs that need to be accommodated, or many of them will simply stop their academic pursuits, hindering the future well-being of themselves and their families and narrowing the pool of future leaders political, business, and community leaders.

Research Questions

This hermeneutic phenomenological study was conducted around one central research question and three sub-questions. The central research question framed the basis of research and described the shared phenomenon, while the sub-questions served to examine additional data relevant to the central research question within the study's theoretical framework: Michael G. Moore's transactional distance theory.

Central Research Question

What are the faculty perceptions of completely asynchronous and synchronous online education at community colleges in western Pennsylvania?

Sub-Question One

What level of student autonomy do faculty perceive sufficient in completely asynchronous or synchronous online education at community colleges in western Pennsylvania?

Sub-Question Two

What is the structure of the online courses the faculty at community colleges in western Pennsylvania establish to help ensure student success and perseverance?

Sub-Question Three

What communication methods do faculty use for completely online education at the community colleges in western Pennsylvania?

Definitions

1. *Andragogy* – The method and practice of teaching adult learners (Seryakova et al., 2022).
2. *Asynchronous education* – An online teaching modality in which course sessions may be recorded, and students may access course materials at any time (Fresen, 2018).
3. *Autonomy* – The ability and commitment to self-govern or self-regulate (Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021).
4. *Communication* – The exchange of information between two or more people. It can be verbal or non-verbal, the latter consisting of elements like body language and facial expressions (Sousa, 2021).
5. *Hybrid Education* – The simultaneous combination of both in-person (live) and asynchronous or synchronous education. Educators use a variety of tools, such as a learning management system, to teach both groups of students (Mec et al., 2020).

6. *Intrinsic Motivation* – A concept that indicates that one does something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable and is recognized as a relevant construct that reflects the natural human behavior to learn and assimilate (Simons et al., 2020).
7. *Meta-Cognition* – The process of thinking about one’s own thinking (Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021).
8. *Pedagogy* – The way in which teaching is exercised, or how faculty impart knowledge to students (Kiryakova, 2019; Seryakova et al., 2022).
9. *Self-Regulation* – Self-regulation is the degree to which a student will actively participate in learning meta-cognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally (Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018).
10. *Structure* – How an online course is put together in a learning management system, including how the course will operate, how to communicate, what lessons are to be learned, and all other components that make up the core contents of the course (Dolch & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; Thomas & Chukhlomin, 2020).
11. *Student Engagement* – Significant interaction between the student and the course material in the learning environment and throughout the duration of the learning experience (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022; Saqlain, 2021; Tomas et al., 2019).
12. *Synchronous Education* – Online education that is presented live. Faculty present the course materials directly to the students, albeit from a remote location (Fresen, 2018).

Summary

The continued decline in student enrollment at community colleges in western Pennsylvania represents a critical issue. Identifying the factors that hinder students’ academic

persistence may aid these community colleges in developing strategies to bolster their student retention rates. Notably, online education has grown in both demand and complexity, and this shift has likely had an impact on student retention. However, there has been little research on faculty perceptions of student retention or the emergence of completely online education. By conducting such research, community colleges in western Pennsylvania could be better equipped to identify what needs to be done and address any underlying issues in order to bolster student retention and provide the optimal online education experience.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this section is to explore the extant literature on faculty perceptions of online education as they pertain to student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. This review aims to synthesize the existing relevant research to gain insight into prevailing understandings of such faculty perceptions through the lens of transactional distance theory. As established, student retention has been identified as a growing issue for most higher education institutions in the United States (Mohammadian et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021; O'Hara & Sparrow, 2019; Sullivan, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020). Understanding faculty perceptions on this matter could point to important metrics that higher education institutions can target to improve student retention (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020). The research process also entailed an exploration of other key components like student autonomy, course structure, technology usage, and communication. While the extant literature covers myriad factors that contribute to student retention problems, there is a lack of research specifically focused on faculty perceptions regarding online education and its impact on student retention. This study fills this gap in the literature, providing higher education institutions—including community colleges in western Pennsylvania—with potential means of improving student retention by targeting particular factors.

Theoretical Framework

Transactional distance theory is the theoretical framework that this study employed to research the phenomenon of completely online education at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. This theory centers around three pillars of distance education: student autonomy,

structure, and communication. A review of the literature revealed that each element of transactional distance theory is relevant to the context of this study.

Transactional Distance Theory

Transactional distance theory aims to explain and account for the virtual teaching and learning relationship as it relates to all forms of distance in the online education environment. The theory features three factors that constitute the lens through which this examination and analysis was conducted.

Importance and Understanding of the Constructs

Each of the above-mentioned constructs plays a key role in understanding faculty perceptions of totally online education (Falloon, 2011; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Moore, 1997; Tugtekin, 2021; Xiaoxia et al., 2015). Insufficient communication can be a potentially impactful barrier between faculty and students, especially when there is physical distance between the two (Elias et al., 2022; Evenbeck, 2019; Ocean & Hicks, 2021). A lack of proper communication brings about misunderstandings, incomplete thoughts, and an inability to process non-verbal cues (Huang et al., 2015; Sousa, 2021). Ineffective communication can hinder success in online teaching and learning. In fact, research indicates that both in-class communication and institutional communication have the potential to impact student retention (Burnett, 2021; Elias et al., 2022; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022).

Similarly, suppose that students who exhibit more self-direction or autonomy are more likely to be successful in completely online classes due to their inherent self-direction; this perseverance impacts student retention (Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Long et al., 2020; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022). In this case, understanding faculty perceptions of the impact of

student autonomy should prove helpful in identifying means of promoting student autonomy. However, there is a paucity of research on issues of student retention facing higher education institutions from the perspective of faculty (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Long et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2021).

The structure of online courses involves not only the learning management system being used to impart knowledge to students but also the level of rigidity and flexibility that faculty incorporate into their online courses (Fernandez et al., 2019; Heilporn et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021; Swart & MacLeod, 2021). Students—as unique individuals and unique learners—thrive under different structures, and those who design the structure of completely online courses, be they asynchronous or synchronous, have many opportunities to gauge the most effective structures in terms of student outcomes. The structure of online education has a significant impact on student success and learning satisfaction. This is critical, as learning satisfaction leads to learning engagement, learning engagement leads to emotional engagement, and emotional engagement leads to student satisfaction (Dolch & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; McKay & Michael, 2021; Thomas & Chukhlomin, 2020).

Need for the Study

Again, while research on various aspects of distance education has already been conducted, there is a dearth of research on how faculty perceive the impact of completely online educational experience on student retention; this study addresses this gap in the literature. Notably, retention is generally believed to be influenced by multiple factors, such as community and family values on education as well as family obligations (Hlinka, 2017; McKay & Michael, 2021; Reyes et al., 2019). When a student's community does not have a history of higher

education or a significant current population that attends higher education, they typically don't feel compelled to enroll or complete a degree (Dahlvig et al., 2020; Hlinka, 2017; Wladis et al., 2017).

Related Literature

Significant research has been conducted to determine which factors may influence the problem of student retention in completely online education courses. However, the extant literature tends to focus on quantitative data that may or may not be appropriate for examining community college performance with respect to concerns such as retention. While there is research on these quantitative factors and other related topics (e.g., current events, under-represented groups, underfunding) at higher education institutions, including community colleges, there is a paucity in the literature with respect to the faculty perceptions of completely online education and its impact on student retention. Additionally, scarce empirical research is available specifically regarding community colleges in the western Pennsylvania region.

Community Colleges and Retention

Community colleges are designed to serve a particular region or county to provide educational opportunities to all at the local level (Burnett, 2021; Evenbeck, 2019; Ocean & Hicks, 2021). They are heavily dependent on government funding and have surprisingly low retention and completion rates relative to traditional four-year colleges and universities. Recent research suggests that retention at community colleges is—at best—at 62 percent (Dolan et al., 2021; Evenbeck, 2019; Gonzaleza-Canche, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021; Odel et al., 2021; Stofer et al., 2021; Travers, 2016). Adding to concerns over the continued viability and success of retention at community colleges is the fact that they are unique institutions that serve diverse

students with distinct backgrounds and life challenges that may impact retention and completion. These institutions are often overlooked and misunderstood, so researching significant concerns like retention is vital for these institutions and the communities they serve (Burnett, 2021; Evenbeck, 2019; Grosz et al., 2022; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021).

The mission of community colleges in the United States is to provide postsecondary education access to all American citizens who want it through open-door admissions. Currently, researchers project that, out of all students enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States, 35 percent of them are enrolled in a community college (Grosz et al., 2022; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020). Community colleges actively and intentionally serve a population of students that is distinct from that served by traditional colleges and universities. They tend to serve more low-income, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and first-generation students than four-year institutions (Dahlvig et al., 2020; Hegazy et al., 2022; Hu, 2019; McKay & Michael, 2021). Additionally, the average age of community college students is distinct, with most students in attendance over the age of 22 (Burnett, 2021; Evenbeck, 2019; Grosz et al., 2022; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021). Table 1 below details the typical representation of underserved populations attending community colleges. Community colleges are the primary higher education institutions available to students from under-represented groups, and these groups are frequently burdened with significant family obligations—often financial or caretaker responsibilities that demand a significant amount of time and energy—which may inhibit students from persisting in their academic careers (Dahlvig et al., 2020; Hlinka, 2017; Stofer et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2017).

Table 1

Underserved or At-Risk Populations Served by Community Colleges (Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; O'Hara & Sparrow, 2019; Saqlain, 2021)

| Percentage | Underserved Category |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| 38% | African-American |
| 46% | Latinx |
| 47% | First-Generation |
| 34% | Pell Grant Recipient |
| 46% | Over 25 Years Old |

The commitment by community colleges and local, state, and federal governments to provide postsecondary education opportunities to those who would not ordinarily be able to otherwise attend a higher education institution makes student retention an issue that concerns a significant portion of the US population (Evenbeck, 2019; Grosz et al., 2022; Mangan, 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020). While the retention issue at community colleges extends across the United States, this research focuses on community colleges in western Pennsylvania.

Student enrollment and retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania have experienced a steady decline over the last three to five years (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Marchante, 2020; Sousa, 2021; Sullivan, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020), suggesting that more citizens are opting not to pursue postsecondary education (Grosz et al., 2022; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky,

2020). Researchers and officials at higher education institutions have posited that there are a myriad of potential factors behind this decline, including underfunding, cost of tuition, lack of knowledge, family obligations, lower birth rates, lower high school graduation rates, prevailing economic conditions, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Baggley, 2020; Bonk, 2020; Hu, 2019; Netanda et al., 2019; Ohnigian et al., 2021; Yung-Tsan et al., 2022). While each of these factors may contribute somewhat to the decline in student retention, the primary drivers of this decline remain unclear (Burnett, 2021; Elias et al., 2022; Long et al., 2020; Marchante, 2020; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Sousa, 2021).

One factor that impacts retention, according to the extant literature, is the cost of tuition and fees and the communication of these costs. While costs are naturally a potential factor behind enrollment, rising costs constitute a barrier to retention because students must find adequate funding sources prior to or during enrollment. Students attending community colleges are more likely to be from under-represented groups who lack access to or knowledge of funding resources (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Grosz et al., 2022; Sousa, 2021; Sullivan, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020). Research has provided quantitative evidence of a correlation between student retention and the costs of tuition and fees. The data suggests that a \$100 increase in tuition and fees results in a 0.71 percent decrease in enrollment and retention (Burnett, 2021; Ocean & Hicks, 2021). When examining the impact of tuition and fees on retention, it is important to also consider the impact on the institutions. Reduced retention reduces available funds in an already underfunded sector of postsecondary education (Burnett, 2021; Elias et al., 2022; Long et al., 2020; Marchante, 2020; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Sousa, 2021).

From the perspective of higher education institutions, student tuition and fees represent the most significant financial source; a decline in either represents a concern in terms of financial stability. Thus, it is critical for higher education institutions to balance the necessary costs of tuition and fees to meet their operational needs with the capacity of students to avoid the creation of a financial barrier to enrollment and retention. Notably, recent research indicates that there is a positive correlation between per-(full-time-)student financial investment in instruction and student retention (Dahlvig et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2019) Community colleges must be aligned with the financial factors that impact them so that strategies for retention can be formulated, executed, and assessed (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Marchante, 2020; Sousa, 2021; Sullivan, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020).

Community colleges are typically underfunded in terms of equity in funding sources, especially from governmental sources, and this underfunding has been identified by numerous researchers as a factor in student retention (e.g., Burnett, 2021; Elias et al., 2022; Evenbeck, 2019; Grosz et al., 2022; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021). Community colleges need financial resources to provide academic programs and services to their students. As noted, evidence suggests that every additional dollar spent on instruction per full-time student has a positive impact on student retention, and vice versa. A correlation between the decline in student retention and underinvestment in community colleges has been established by several researchers (e.g., Gonzalez-Canche, 2022; Hu, 2019; Reyes et al., 2019).

Higher education institutions receive funding from a variety of sources—but two in particular: direct (local, state, and federal) government funding, and tuition and fees. When state agencies underfund or donations decline, student tuition and fees are impacted. If the financial

resources to operate an institution are not provided by the former, operational costs fall on the latter (Evenbeck, 2019; Grosz et al., 2022; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021). As already noted, researchers have already identified tuition and fees as well as the way in which they are communicated to students as factors that hinder student retention. Adding to this issue is the fact that community colleges are designed to provide postsecondary educational opportunities to all citizens, including under-represented groups who already face financial struggles.

In addition to the financial struggles behind student retention concerns, researchers have identified a correlation between the underfunding of community colleges and inaccurate data collection and analysis (Burnett, 2021; Evenbeck, 2019; Grosz et al., 2022; Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021). There are several institutions and instruments behind the collection of data from higher education institutions. One of the most prominent is the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which began tracking student cohorts in 1972 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Another is the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS88), which began tracking cohorts of eighth-grade students over the course of eight years to track students' transitions post-high school transitions into postsecondary education and/or the workforce. In 1990, the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) began to follow students for six years from the point of enrollment in postsecondary education. Most relevant to modern higher education institutions is the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which tracks institutions rather than the students that they serve; notably, however, this instrument does not consider students' socioeconomic status or academic preparation of students, both of which

strongly influence student retention (Burnett, 2021; Evenbeck, 2019; Grosz et al., 2022; Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021).

The data derived from all of these sources is significant to researchers, though they have largely found that the data is biased and unfair to community colleges. The data takes into account neither the unique role of community colleges nor the unique circumstances of those who attend them (Burnett, 2021; Elias et al., 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021). Community colleges and their four-year counterparts have vastly different missions and student bodies. The data collected by each tends to have an inequitable consequence on the community colleges due to these differences, as state funding is often performance-based, meaning it is linked to enrollment, retention, and completion rates. Such a blanket assessment is unfair to community colleges, however, as their (often non-traditional and under-represented) students often transfer to other institutions, decline to complete their degree program for any given reason, take longer to finish a program, or have other family and life obligations. The data—and, in turn, the funding—is skewed in favor of four-year colleges and universities, as it neglects the foundational purpose of community colleges. Notably, researchers have found that the literature is over-reliant on quantitative data; qualitative studies are scarce but necessary to accurately assess performance at community colleges (Burnett, 2021; Evenbeck, 2019; Grosz et al., 2022; Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021).

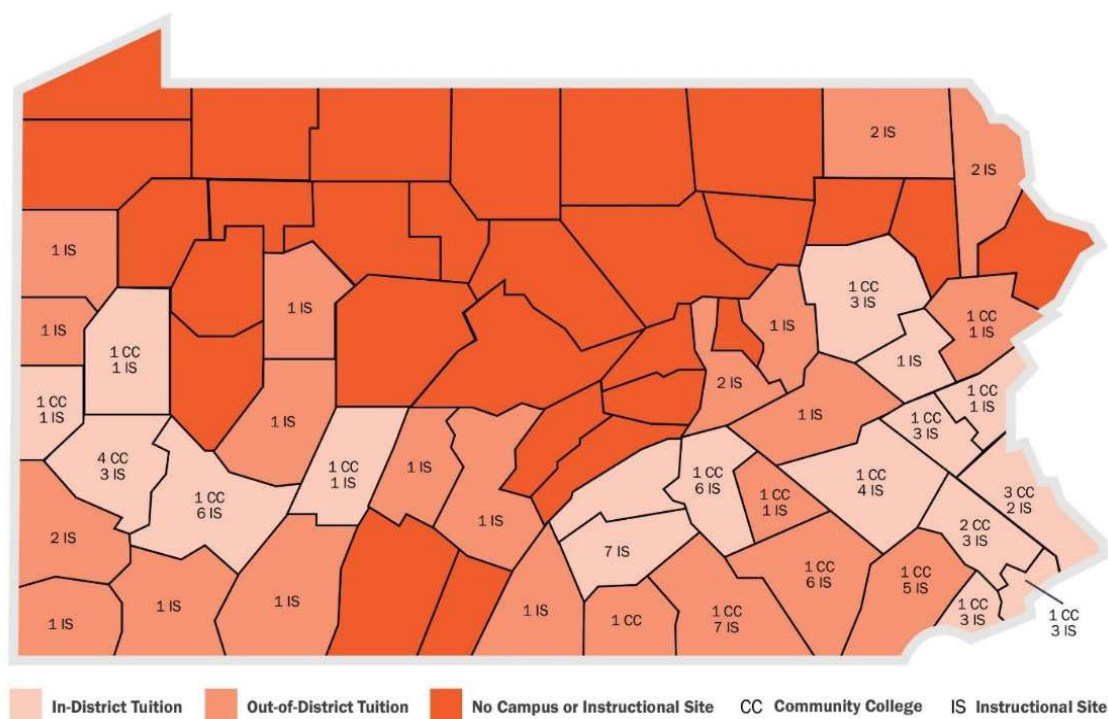
Researchers who have examined the data on retention at community colleges in Pennsylvania have used a multitude of lenses to dig deeper and identify the factors behind the decline. In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, particularly the rural areas in western Pennsylvania, researchers have found a decline in graduation rates dating back to 2009; the

graduation of the children of baby boomers, the “echo boom,” and student engagement have all had a significant influence on the overall decline (Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; O’Hara & Sparrow, 2019; Saqlain, 2021). It is important to recall that Pennsylvania is ranked 40th out of the 50 US states in terms of adults aged 25–64 with a postsecondary education (Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022).

The region of Pennsylvania considered in this study features many rural and low-income households where a lack of access to higher education—including community colleges—compounds the problems related to student enrollment and retention (Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; O’Hara & Sparrow, 2019; Saqlain, 2021). Figure 1 details the number and location of higher education institutions in Pennsylvania, highlighting specific areas where no such institutions exist.

Figure 1

Community Colleges and Instructional Sites in Pennsylvania (Hunter et al., 2016)



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More research is needed on the external factors that impact student retention—not just performance data. These factors (e.g., birth rate, graduation rate, geographic access to postsecondary education, access to technology) should be examined to gain a better foundational understanding of their impact on retention. Moreover, variables that impact student retention like family obligations, sense of need, sense of safety, access to knowledge about postsecondary education, and many more need to be assessed so that strategies can be developed to address their negative impacts on student persistence (Burnett, 2021; Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; Ocean & Hicks, 2021; Saqlain, 2021). Faculty perceptions on how these factors may influence student retention would provide

valuable insight into how they can be addressed. As such perceptions are simply not available in the literature, this study actively sought them out.

Historical Development of Transactional Distance Theory

Transactional distance theory was developed by Michael G. Moore (1997) in the 1970s to examine the psychological distance among students, faculty members, classmates, and learning materials. Moore saw a need to develop a framework to analyze the online teaching and learning experience, developing the first pedagogical theory to study and analyze courses offered through technology. Moore developed transactional distance theory to understand the impact of distance education on student success and persistence (Falloon, 2011; Moore, 1997; Tugtekin, 2021; Xiaoxia et al., 2015). Moore (1997) and other transactional distance theory researchers, such as Falloon (2011), Tugtekin (2021), and Xiaoxia et al. (2015), hold that the distance and transactions between teacher and learner are fluid rather than distinct static variables. Critical to this thought process is the idea that both teachers and learners bring with them unique personal communication patterns and other behavioral factors that substantially impact the learning process.

Although Moore (1997) and other theorists have worked to establish and expand on our understanding of distance teaching and learning, there is room to grow here (Falloon, 2011; Moore, 1997; Tugtekin, 2021; Xiaoxia et al., 2015). Researchers and theorists have identified transactional distance theory as extremely helpful in analyzing and improving online teaching, learning, and student retention. (Dolch & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; Thomas & Chukhlomin, 2020). A critical aspect moving forward, according to online teaching theorists and researchers,

is the rapid growth and use of asynchronous and synchronous online modalities (Falloon, 2011; Moore, 1997; Stoklosa et al., 2021; Tugtekin, 2021; Xiaoxia et al., 2015).

Definition and Foundation

Transactional distance is regarded as the perceived psychological distance among students, faculty, and other facets of the online classroom. Transactional distance theory attempts to understand the cognitive impact of online education, and the theoretical framework aims to measure student success and satisfaction (Moore, 1997; Netanda et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2021).

Moore (1997) highlights three components as the foundation of transactional distance theory: student self-directedness (or autonomy), course structure, and dialogue (or communication). Student self-directedness or autonomy is the ability of a student to be self-aware, take an active role in their learning, and make informed decisions regarding their learning path (Aluko et al., 2011; Howell et al., 2023; Schwartz et al., 2021; Yung-Tsan et al., 2022). Such autonomy boosts both confidence and academic achievement, stimulating students' engagement and boosting their desire to persist (Fernandez et al., 2019; Stofer et al., 2021; Stoklosa et al., 2021). Course structure refers simply to the design of a course (Dolan et al., 2021; McKay & Michael, 2021; Wladis et al., 2017). The structure may be looser or tighter depending largely on the structural style of the responsible faculty member. Communication in online education refers to all means of communicating information. In an online classroom, information is exchanged between faculty member and students as well as among students (Kirchner & Pepper, 2020; Sousa, 2021). While course content and overarching program have a

degree of influence over course design, faculty members have significant latitude over all three of these elements and, therefore, have worthwhile insight.

Student Autonomy

Researchers believe that there is a connective link between student autonomy and student retention at higher education institutions (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021). Students who perceive the online courses they have taken as positive experiences and who consider themselves to have been in at least partial control of their educational goals are more likely to persist in pursuing their educational goals, positively impacting student retention. In addition, students who demonstrate more autonomy in an online course are more likely to be successful in reaching the intended course outcomes (Burge-Hall et al., 2019; Mooney & Francis, 2018; Muller et al., 2020; Page et al., 2019). Such students not only set educational goals for themselves but also are more inclined to ask questions on matters that they do not understand, request points of clarity, participate more frequently, manage their time better, and persist through difficulties, among other tendencies; overall, they are more likely to be engaged and successful in the teaching and learning transaction (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021).

Successful students who feel like they are in control over their educational goals feel empowered and are more willing to take the initiative to engage with faculty. Such a sense of control leads students to feel that the transaction between themselves and the faculty benefits them and provides them with a path to their future goals through purposeful academic pursuits (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021). This

positive experience is vital for encouraging students to return to stay at their community college and take additional courses that benefit them in their educational, personal, and career goals.

Faculty who impart knowledge through online education platforms may have the experience and expertise necessary to accurately assess student-level engagement, autonomy, and success in the online classroom. The data that faculty may provide is vital for community colleges in western Pennsylvania to develop strategies that enhance student retention (Baier & Kunter, 2020; Mec et al., 2020; Saqlain, 2021). Faculty capable of influencing student autonomy could pivot the online class experience to bring out the highest possible levels of autonomy and performance in their students through the incorporation of an appropriate amount of innovation and challenge based on both student needs and course-specific context (Baier & Kunter, 2020; Evenbeck, 2019; Mec et al., 2020; Saqlain, 2021).

Knowledgeable faculty who are aware of the impacts of student engagement and the factors behind a lack of engagement are better equipped to develop strategies that promote students' social interactions in the online classroom. Therefore, faculty familiar with online education modalities should have informed perspectives on the factors that drive student autonomy and, in turn, could enhance student retention (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021). This research explored faculty perceptions of student autonomy to identify facets of online education that may positively impact student autonomy, performance, and retention with a focus on community colleges in western Pennsylvania, addressing a clear gap in the literature.

Student Engagement

Student engagement has been cited by higher education institutions and their faculty as an essential component of both student autonomy and student retention (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022; Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018; Saqlain, 2021; Tomas et al., 2019). If a student is not engaged in their own academic career—regardless of the reason—it is highly unlikely that they will persist in their academic career goals; therefore, faculty and higher education institutions must identify the factors behind student engagement (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022; Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018; Saqlain, 2021; Tomas et al., 2019).

To be engaged, a student must find the learning experience meaningful and appealing. This means that all aspects of the teaching and learning environment must address the educational, cognitive, and social aspects of the learning environment (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022; Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018; Saqlain, 2021; Tomas et al., 2019). The ability to make the cognitive jump to college-level work is also considered by some scholars to be a factor in student persistence (e.g., Hlinka, 2017; McKay & Michael, 2021; Reyes et al., 2019). More than one-third of high school graduates enroll in a community college. Over half of incoming high school graduates are placed into developmental courses upon entering college, which may significantly impact student engagement (Hlinka, 2017; McKay & Michael, 2021; Reyes et al., 2019; Stofer et al., 2021).

Many educational researchers as well as experienced faculty hold that, while there are challenges on any remote teaching platform pertaining to class design and technology, it is often the social aspect of online learning modalities that causes issues with student engagement and persistence. This is especially true of completely online modalities, as social interactions are

typically very limited in these modalities (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022; Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018; Saqlain, 2021; Tomas et al., 2019). The psychological aspect of being isolated and failing to feel like part of a larger group is likely to impact students' mental health and belongingness, both of which can impact persistence (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022; Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018; Saqlain, 2021; Tomas et al., 2019). Students who feel less engaged in the classroom—regardless of platform—have been shown to have lower GPAs and levels of perseverance (Heilporn et al., 2021; Lin & Gao, 2020; Saqlain, 2021).

To address these feelings of isolation and a lack of belongingness, many faculty have developed strategies to minimize these feelings. Faculty who are experienced in teaching completely online courses have noticed that adding social components to the course structure aids students in feeling truly part of the online classroom (Heilporn et al., 2021; Lin & Gao, 2020; Saqlain, 2021). Some faculty have innovated in how they approach adding social aspects to the online classroom, incorporating discussion boards, group assignments, and electronic breakout rooms to meet students' psychosocial needs. Meeting these needs is believed by experienced faculty and educational researchers to promote student persistence and, in turn, student retention (Heilporn et al., 2021; Lin & Gao, 2020; Saqlain, 2021). This research explored faculty perceptions of student engagement and the facets of online education that may positively affect student engagement, performance, and retention with a focus on community colleges in western Pennsylvania, filling a notable gap in the literature.

Structure of Online Instruction

The determination of whether a course adopts a completely asynchronous or synchronous instruction structure is typically made by that course's program. However, a faculty member is

tasked with carrying out the chosen structure, setting all of its specific factors. Asynchronous online education refers to remote courses that are recorded in advance so that students may “attend” class whenever it is most convenient for them to do so (Lin & Gao, 2020; Sweany et al., 2020). Synchronous online education refers to remote courses that are delivered to students live on a set schedule (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022; Lin & Gao, 2020). Notably, the structure of the online classroom—especially for completely online course offerings—impacts students’ educational experiences and, in turn, their success levels and retention rates (Heilporn et al., 2021; Ma & Faja, 2021; Mec et al., 2020).

To properly structure a completely online course, faculty must be knowledgeable and skilled in online instruction. While the asynchronous modality allows students more flexibility in how they consume the course information, the synchronous modality is firm in its requirement that students attend remotely at the moment of delivery. Some courses are hybrid in the sense that they incorporate both asynchronous and synchronous elements. Notably, however, such hybrid courses require even more planning and development by faculty members, making the planning and imparting of knowledge even more complex (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Heilporn et al., 2021; Mec et al., 2020; Sweany et al., 2020).

The structure of an online course includes its delivery method, which is typically a learning management system (LMS). Faculty must be well-versed in how to set up an online course in the LMS in which they build their courses (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Heilporn et al., 2021; Mec et al., 2020; Sweany et al., 2020). Faculty often incorporate innovative ideas into the structure of their online courses to make the course structure more adaptable to students’ needs, especially students who may just now be learning how to navigate an LMS. Experienced

faculty also incorporate high-impact practices into the structure of their online courses, including elements such as touch points, user-friendly technology, and collaborative learning. Courses with high-impact practices in teaching have been shown to have a positive influence on student learning and engagement, thereby promoting student retention (Dolan et al., 2021; Ohnigian et al., 2021; Stoklosa et al., 2021).

Additionally, faculty have arranged the content structure in a way that is intended to enhance students' learning skills. The content structure refers to the way in which the faculty member breaks down the learning materials over the course of the class (Narang et al., 2022; Sweany et al., 2020). This includes purposeful learning outcomes, module length, course format, and any other building block that is conducive to success among modern students (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Heilporn et al., 2021; Sweany et al., 2020).

The manner of knowledge delivery also has a substantial impact on student learning and engagement (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Mec et al., 2020; Sweany et al., 2020). For example, faculty may focus classwork and projects on specific problems rather than engaging in traditional models of instruction, such as lecturing and book-related work. By adjusting the structure of delivery to one that is problem-based, students become immersed in the work, facilitating productive group projects and, in turn, addressing some of the social concerns regarding students' persistence (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Mec et al., 2020; Sweany et al., 2020).

Structure, as part of Moore's transactional distance theory, is an essential element for successfully imparting knowledge to students from a distance. It is a fundamental aspect of research efforts aimed at understanding the impact of online andragogy and student success (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Grant, 2021; Mec et al., 2020; Sweany et al., 2020). In addition

to innovative means of structuring the core educational components of an online course, experienced and developed faculty are implementing strategic means of structuring their courses in a way that develops student engagement from the beginning of students' academic careers.

To maintain student engagement throughout the duration of each course, faculty make use of tools like color-coding for learning and ensure workload consistency to help students be successful in their educational goals, both of which are believed to positively influence students' persistence rate (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Grant, 2021; Mec et al., 2020; Sweany et al., 2020). As established, there is a dearth of research on the structure of online courses at the community colleges in western Pennsylvania. Thus, the results of this research provide valuable insight into faculty perceptions of how course structure impacts student retention through the use of transactional distance theory.

Faculty Professional Development for Online Teaching

In recent years, people looking to enroll in college courses have expressed rising interest in online classes (Davis et al., 2019; Hegazy et al., 2022; Mishra, 2019). This increased demand for online opportunities calls for faculty who are proficient in teaching online. Faculty may be viewed as key stakeholders in students' education at an institution. This vested interest makes faculty want increased professional development tailored to online teaching so they can provide students with the best learning experience possible (Bonk, 2020; Heap et al., 2021; Mishra, 2019; Raffaghelli & Stewart, 2020; Real, 2022).

Existing data shows that institutions that invest in faculty professional development have higher levels of student engagement and success in the online teaching and learning environment (Thomas & Chukhlomin, 2020; Wladis et al., 2017; Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2020). This strongly

suggests that faculty should be given developmental opportunities to promote their online teaching skills. Importantly, faculty development should not be limited to a single initial training program; rather, it should be an ongoing process that adapts to trends in both technology and students so that faculty remain proficient over time in managing courses through an LMS (Belt & Lowenthal, 2020; Diaz-Trindade & Albuquerque, 2022; Hegazy et al., 2022; McKay & Michael, 2021; Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Negrin-Medina et al., 2022).

To provide high-quality online teaching in an impactful learning environment, faculty should exhibit certain competencies, including the ability to record lectures, successfully conduct a synchronous virtual class, adequately navigate an LMS, generate student engagement, and use electronic forms for quizzes, tests, and surveys (Hegazy et al., 2022; Mishra, 2019; Negrin-Medina et al., 2022). Institutions must ensure the availability of developmental opportunities for faculty to provide them with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to provide an impactful online learning experience and, in turn, positively impact student engagement, satisfaction, and retention.

In recent times, much of this professional development has focused on digital skills, often referred to as digital competence or digital literacy (Diaz-Trindade & Albuquerque, 2022; Xuefei & Yang, 2021). Digital competence or literacy is typically defined as an awareness of, positive attitude toward, ability to use, and experience using digital technology (Diaz-Trindade & Albuquerque, 2022; Mishra, 2019). Existing data demonstrates that, when faculty have the competencies necessary to successfully teach online, students are better equipped to adapt to relevant technology and be successful in and satisfied with their academic pursuits, promoting

student persistence (Hegazy et al., 2022; Mishra, 2019; Negrin-Medina et al., 2022; Saiyad et al., 2020).

The United States Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) grant requires community colleges that participate in the grant program to implement innovative strategies to advance training and boost both retention and completion rates among community college students (Belt & Lowenthal, 2020; Diaz-Trindade & Albuquerque, 2022; Hegazy et al., 2022; McKay & Michael, 2021; Negrin-Medina et al., 2022). Through ongoing professional development, faculty can be more innovative and better equipped to incorporate high-impact practices into the online learning environment, promoting student engagement and, in turn, student retention. This research gathered data on the faculty perspective regarding how professional development may influence the impact of online teaching on student retention. Transactional distance theory is a student satisfaction tool that can be used to discover how professional development relates to the online learning experience and its impact on student retention (Belt & Lowenthal, 2020; Diaz-Trindade & Albuquerque, 2022; Hegazy et al., 2022; McKay & Michael, 2021; Moore, 1997; Negrin-Medina et al., 2022).

Technology Used by Community Colleges for Online Modalities

Technology at community colleges is a continually evolving factor. Higher education institutions understand that, to keep up with the demands of the existing pool of potential students, they must pursue modern technology to provide learning platforms that fit into the lives of modern students (Duran, 2015; Liu et al., 2020; Wood, 2020). Community colleges in western Pennsylvania have struggled with declining rates of student enrollment and retention due to several factors, including reduced graduation rates, lack of access, and competing priorities (e.g.,

raising a family, working). These competing priorities may make it unfeasible for someone who wants to change their lives for the better to pursue an education. Thus, higher education institutions must provide modern technology and classroom modalities to meet the needs of the diverse modern pool of potential students (Liu et al., 2020; Saiyad et al., 2020; Wood, 2020).

LMSs like Blackboard and Canvas are examples of technology that higher education institutions use to enable students to attend class from anywhere. These LMSs can be used regardless of structure (i.e., asynchronous, synchronous, or hybrid), offering students the option to engage in entirely online learning, be it through pre-recorded instruction or live instruction, through a single online platform. The availability of the LMSs alone allows higher education institutions to provide an education to students whom they would not be able to serve otherwise (Liu et al., 2020; Roach & Attardi, 2021; Wood, 2020).

Although the use of LMSs is a significant component of online learning, there are some concerns that many institutions overlook in the provision of online courses. One concern is the fact that students must be both willing and able to take online courses, but many students lack the infrastructure to reliably access the Internet. For example, community colleges in western Pennsylvania discovered during the COVID-19 pandemic that students residing in lower-income neighborhoods often couldn't afford home internet access. As a result, the pandemic required these community colleges to swiftly develop and distribute items such as free hot spots as a means by which students could continue their education at a time when social distancing was imperative (Alexandru-Comin, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020). This swift shift in teaching modality rapidly enlightened higher education institutions on the potential advantages and challenges of online learning technology.

Modern students at community colleges in western Pennsylvania must have access to the technology used by these colleges in order to receive a proper education (Liu et al., 2020; Roach & Attardi, 2021; Wood, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic alongside other modern factors has made this necessity an area worth exploring. Notably, this has been a concern since online education began to gain prominence (Roach & Attardi, 2021; Sullivan, 2021).

Researchers in the field of online education assert that, while there has been some success in closing the gap between socioeconomic classes with regard to access to and ability to use technology, there is still much room for improvement (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Dolch & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; Elias et al., 2022). Technological factors must be thoroughly analyzed to assess their impact on student engagement and retention and enable the development of strategies that either reduce technological inequity or make it a less significant factor. This is particularly important when it comes to the inclusion of at-risk and non-traditional students. The results of this study provide insight into faculty perceptions of the most appropriate ways to aid students with regard to the use of technology in their studies (Roach & Attardi, 2021; Sullivan, 2021).

Impact of Technology Available

Previous research indicates that access to technology influences student persistence in the online teaching and learning environment. Students who lack access to a certain (platform-dependent) minimum level of technology are far less likely to succeed and persist (Fresen, 2018; Saiyad et al., 2020; Seryakova et al., 2022; Wolinsky, 2020). Beyond the fact that it is almost impossible to thrive in the online learning environment without this level of technological access, this lack of access in students' educational pursuits perpetuates their poor technological abilities

(Liu et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2021). Currently, LMSs, wireless technology, and virtual classrooms are all in use at most higher education institutions. Students who lack means of accessing this technology are effectively excluded from the ability to learn online. These students typically have significant personal responsibilities that leave them little time to attempt to pursue an education in the traditional classroom environment (Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Fresen, 2018; Sullivan, 2021; Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2020). Online education may be their only hope of changing their lives for the better through continued education.

Higher education institutions, including community colleges in western Pennsylvania, are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that many students in rural areas lack the infrastructure or financial resources necessary to take courses online. Thus, they are responding to this dynamic by purchasing and distributing technology to these students when possible, providing the necessary technology to enroll and persist in online courses (Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Fresen, 2018; Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2020). Higher education institutions are aware that a failure to pursue such technological support for disadvantaged or rural students risks losing out on a significant population of potential students (Seryakova et al., 2022; Wolinsky, 2020).

Student retention is a significant problem for most higher education institutions, and providing students with the technology needed for online courses likely supports both enrollment and retention (Fresen, 2018; Wolinsky, 2020). Educators and researchers may not perfectly align when it comes to their thoughts on the advantages and disadvantages of completely online education, but most agree that there are, in fact, both advantages and disadvantages that have a significant influence on key institutional factors (Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Fresen, 2018; Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2020). Technological demands constitute a crucial factor behind the

dynamics of the online classroom and demonstrate the grave need for insight into faculty's perceptions of the online learning environment as it pertains to student retention.

Technological Adaptation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In March 2020 (for the US), higher education institutions along with the rest of the world were forced to adapt and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate business continuity (Alexandru-Comin, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021). The pandemic required community colleges in western Pennsylvania, along with most other higher education institutions, to begin operating through various delivery platforms at a moment's notice to impart knowledge entirely online. While most community colleges were already offering a significant level of completely online education to certain groups of students, this situation required them to move *all* of their operations online at a high level of quality during a time of crisis (Hegazy et al., 2022; Ohnigian et al., 2021; Yung-Tsan et al., 2022).

This rapid shift to entirely virtual course offerings had a negative impact on both the faculty and students at higher education institutions, all of whom were worried about their personal health and safety while being forced to adapt to a new model of education. Many faculty expressed they were ill-prepared to move to a completely online modality (Baggley, 2020; Kirchner & Pepper, 2020; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Netanda et al., 2019). The speed at which the transition had to occur added to everyone's anxiety. Faculty felt overwhelmed by the sudden adaptation to a new normal, and the institutions needed to rapidly develop training and development initiatives for faculty who lacked experience with online teaching (Bonk, 2020; Davis et al., 2019; Ohnigian et al., 2021). This was no easy task, but most rose to the challenge. Experienced faculty took action to quickly curate online course content. At the same time, they

expanded their knowledge and competencies regarding distance teaching so they could still provide students with a high-quality educational experience, and this work undoubtedly reduced the number of students who dropped out during the pandemic (Baggley, 2020; Kirchner & Pepper, 2020; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Netanda et al., 2019; Stofer et al., 2021). Through these efforts on the part of faculty to learn and adapt, higher education institutions were able to ease the worries of their enrolled students.

Higher education institutions also developed an inventory of what was needed to successfully transition to completely online offerings. It quickly became clear that technology was a crucial component of these adaptations, prompting two significant issues. First, demand for the relevant technology exceeded available supply (Bonk, 2020; Saiyad et al., 2020; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021; Yung-Tsan et al., 2022), leading to shortages and long backorder queues. Second, some students lacked access to the necessary hardware and software (Baier & Kunter, 2020; Dolch & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; Sousa, 2021; Thomas & Chukhlomin, 2020; Wood, 2020).

This pandemic-era transition lack had both positive and negative impacts on faculty and students. Positively, many were forced to become acquainted and skilled in new technologies, and higher education institutions were able to maintain a sense of normalcy amid the crisis (Baggley, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Stoklosa et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2017). Negatively, faculty reported feeling overwhelmed, and adapting to the new methods while maintaining a high-quality level created more work for them. Additionally, while some students were familiar with online modalities, a considerable portion were not—and research indicates that this unfamiliarity hindered student persistence (Bonk, 2020; Hegazy et al., 2022; Ohnigian et al., 2021; Yung-Tsan

et al., 2022). The results of this study fill in the missing data on how faculty perceive the impact of online modalities on student retention now that the worst impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have subsided.

Communication

Effective dialogue and communication are crucial for successfully imparting information from one individual to another (Roach & Attardi, 2021; Sousa, 2021). Importantly, verbal dialogue is not the only form of information exchange that must be considered; verbal, visual, response, observation, confirmation, and a host of other communication methods must be considered in the transfer of knowledge from faculty to students (Moore, 1997; Sousa, 2021). Previous research suggests that the communication style of an institution on a variety of matters—including but not limited to tuition and fee schedules, course catalogues, and syllabi— influences students' behaviors and actions, including overall retention (Falloon, 2011; Long et al., 2020; Ocean & Hicks, 2021; Sousa, 2021).

Students are individuals with distinct learning styles. Thus, attempting to impart knowledge purely through verbal communication would be a mistake. Successful educators make use of multiple forms of communication in each class to cast a wide net, ensuring that all students can receive new knowledge in a way that suits their optimal learning style. Students who do not experience a learning environment from which they believe they are benefiting may be reluctant to persist in their educational journey, impacting student retention (Moore, 1997; Sousa, 2021). Through their education and experience, faculty can use various communication styles to help students to receive and understand the materials presented in the online classroom. The results of this study constitute a valuable contribution to the literature on communication

styles used in online classroom modalities and the ways in which they impact student retention in the eyes of faculty.

Summary

Community colleges were designed to afford all citizens an opportunity in higher education (Gonzaleza-Canche, 2022; McKay & Michael, 2021; Odel et al., 2021). There is a strong need for any barriers to students enrolling and remaining in college to be identified so that they can be addressed. Understanding faculty perceptions of a growing sector in higher education—online modalities—is critical to the continued success of higher education institutions. Demand for online education has risen considerably in recent years, and it is expected to continue rising moving forward (Gonzaleza-Canche, 2022; McKay & Michael, 2021; Odel et al., 2021; Saiyad et al., 2020). The online option offers access and flexibility to students who would be unable to attend otherwise. This option is particularly attractive to non-traditional students (Davis et al., 2019; Ohnigian et al., 2021). Through the fuller picture of the impacts of online education on retention that the results of this study provided, institutional decision-makers will be able to identify the impediments to student retention and, in turn, develop strategies to address them.

The retention problem is considerably more significant for online students than for in-person students (Wladis et al., 2017). Faculty are responsible for classroom management and their own manner of imparting knowledge. Success in imparting knowledge to students can be measured using the components of transactional distance theory: student self-directedness (or autonomy), course structure, and dialogue (or communication) (Aluko et al., 2011; Howell et al., 2023; Moore, 1997; Netanda et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2021). This theory holds that success

along these three dimensions promotes student engagement, and student engagement can lead to improved student retention (Dahlvig et al., 2020; Hlinka, 2017; Mohammadian et al., 2021).

Student retention is a concern for most institutions in the modern higher education environment (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Marchante, 2020; Sousa, 2021; Sullivan, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020), including the community colleges in western Pennsylvania. The extant literature has largely focused on increasing enrollment strategies, neglecting strategies for retaining students. Modern higher education institutions have recognized a need to keep up with modern technology to accommodate students' evolving learning goals. Thus, faculty perceptions of how the rise of completely online instruction impacts students should prove valuable to the development of strategies aimed at promoting student retention through technology-based learning (Evenbeck, 2019; Liu et al., 2020).

Moore's (1997) transactional distance theory asserts that the distance between faculty and students can substantially impact the latter's success and retention. This concept of distance does not refer to any amount of geographical or physical space; rather, it refers to the psychological space between faculty and students (Aluko et al., 2011; Netanda et al., 2019; Yung-Tsan et al., 2022). Notably, transactional distance theory demonstrates how this psychological space can help or hinder the foundational elements of successful online teaching and learning, such as communication (communication here referring to verbal communication, physical cues, facial reactions, and other non-verbal cues that may be missed or significantly misunderstood). Moore (1997) and others who support the transactional distance theory (e.g., Falloon, 2011; Tugtekin, 2021; Xiaoxia et al., 2015) believe there is an inverse relationship between the theory's

components and the way in which these components have demonstrated a link to success in completely online education.

Through the perceptions of faculty who directly interact with students and have first-hand views of the factors impacting student persistence, the results of this study provide a glimpse into the knowledge and strategies that experienced distance education faculty perceive as positively impactful on the student experience. This knowledge will serve as a resource for both community colleges in western Pennsylvania and the faculty who teach at those institutions. Of course, the results will also constitute a valuable contribution to the body of empirical research in the realm of online education and, more specifically, the problem of student retention.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This chapter details how a qualitative research methodology was used to explore the shared lived experiences of faculty members teaching asynchronous and/or synchronous online courses at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. These shared lived experiences were used to gather data on the central research question and sub-questions. This study sought to understand and describe faculty's perceptions of completely online education modalities through shared lived experiences, especially amid rising demand for online education attributable to multiple separate factors (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). The literature suggests that changes in how knowledge is imparted to students have a significant impact on student persistence, and this dynamic influenced the design of this research project (Fresen, 2018). Put succinctly, a hermeneutic phenomenology study on the shared phenomena of completely online education was conducted. The section below on the research design addresses why a qualitative methodology was best for this research topic and its research questions. This chapter then describes the study's setting and participants before establishing my researcher positionality. Furthermore, the interpretive framework and the way in which it was incorporated into our analysis are identified alongside relevant philosophical assumptions. The chapter also offers a clear explanation of the role of the researcher as well as the myriad permissions and methods of collection, analysis, and synthesis involved in the research project. Finally, the chapter covers important ethical considerations.

Research Design

This effort to understand the faculty perspective on completely online educational modalities and their impact on student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania was best served by a qualitative research design. Qualitative research designs are based on a methodology of inquiry focused on social or human problems. In this study, the faculty's thoughts on completely online education and student retention concern both social and human elements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pearse, 2021). Completely online education represents the only forum through which many people can pursue higher education and, in turn, change their lives for the better.

Design Fit for the Research Project

A qualitative methodology was selected for this study because obtaining information on the varying thoughts, experiences, and ideas of a sample of faculty from three of the community colleges in western Pennsylvania provided a diverse set of responses that can be used to achieve the study's desired outcomes. Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase in the number of synchronous and asynchronous online modalities offered to students (Fresen, 2018; Ohnigian et al., 2021). The faculty who delivered the online courses during the pandemic had a front-row view seat of what went well and what needs improvement or growth. While online modalities have long been recognized by most faculty at modern higher education institutions, the COVID-19 pandemic truly provided faculty with insight into the value and abilities of online education, meaningfully establishing online courses as a legitimate option (Alexandru-Comin, 2020).

Notably, student retention has become a critical issue for most higher education institutions in the US (Sousa, 2021). With the recent surge in demand for online courses, it is hypothesized that online learning modalities impact whether students attending community colleges in western Pennsylvania persist in returning to complete their degree or certificate programs. Despite the fact that faculty have the most contact with students and the most experience with online teaching modalities, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to their perceptions of the student retention problem. A hermeneutic approach was selected over a transcendental approach because I currently work in higher education, and the hermeneutic approach provides an opportunity to describe and narrate the faculty members' perceptions while reducing the risk of overlooked researcher biases.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The research design planned for this study was hermeneutic phenomenology. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that phenomenology is appropriate for those who have shared lived experiences. Through interviews with faculty members at community colleges in western Pennsylvania, the thoughts, knowledge, experiences, ideas, and lived experiences of the participants faculty were described and narrated in the study. The hermeneutic approach provided the descriptive component of the design (Mishra, 2019).

Max Van Manen's (1990) approach to qualitative research—one linked to the human sciences that is useful to researchers interested in andragogy—influenced the design and interpretation of this hermeneutical phenomenological study. This interpretive approach consists of four components of phenomenological lived experiences: lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relations. Their interest in learning about completely online education,

especially as it relates to student retention, is a significant part of the researcher's everyday life (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the faculty perceptions of completely asynchronous and synchronous online education at community colleges in western Pennsylvania?

Sub-Question One

What level of student autonomy do faculty perceive sufficient in completely asynchronous or synchronous online education at community colleges in western Pennsylvania?

Sub-Question Two

What is the structure of the online courses the faculty at community colleges in western Pennsylvania establish to help ensure student success and perseverance?

Sub-Question Three

What communication methods do faculty use for completely online education at the community colleges in western Pennsylvania?

Setting and Participants

This section has two primary purposes: describing the setting in which the data-collection process took place (e.g., location, region, type of environment), and detailing the participants (e.g., number of participants, reasons for selection). The setting and participants were selected to pursue answers to the central research question as well as the secondary research questions.

Setting

The setting for this qualitative study was western Pennsylvania, which houses a rich and diverse pool of participants. The geographic scope covers Pittsburgh and the border with Ohio, where there is optimal infrastructure available for business operations. A multitude of different industries and businesses invest in this area because of this infrastructure (Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Stofer et al., 2021). The region is a former steel mining area that had to reinvent itself once the steel industry shuttered. The availability of resources for people to retrain and get educated is vital to reestablish an area impacted by an economic downturn. Thus, the considered community colleges in western Pennsylvania are all those that offer several online teaching and learning modalities. A primary reason behind the selection of this setting was that I am familiar with the region; even more importantly, however, it was selected because it is an area that features rich diversity in the socioeconomic, educational, and career statuses of its residents (Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017).

There are four community colleges in western Pennsylvania. I have a professional relationship with one of the four, so data was only collected from the other three institutions to prevent potential conflicts of interest and ensure the integrity of the study. For ethical purposes, pseudonyms were used to identify the three considered community colleges: WPACC1, WPACC2, and WPACC3. The researcher has maintained a confidential key for the pseudonyms in locked file cabinets and a password-protected electronic file. Notably, WPACC2 and WPACC3 have very similar organizational structures, while that of WPACC1 is relatively large. WPACC1 has three campuses led by individual presidents who report to the overall College President on the main campus. Table 2 contains student enrollment status data for each

Table 3

2020 Financial Aid Provided to Full-Time, First-Year, Degree-Seeking Students as Reported to the IPEDS by Each Institution (Percentages) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

| | Institution | | WPACC1 | WPACC2 | WPACC3 | |
|--|------------------------------|--|--------|--------|--------|--|
| | | | | | | |
| | Type of Financial Aid | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | Any Grant Aid | | 52 | 82 | 77 | |
| | Federal Grants | | 49 | 71 | 53 | |
| | Pell Grant | | 49 | 44 | 53 | |
| | State/Local Grants | | 22 | 44 | 31 | |
| | Institutional Grants | | 0 | 19 | 7 | |
| | Any Loans | | 18 | 28 | 51 | |
| | Federal Loans | | 18 | 28 | 50 | |
| | Other Loans | | 0 | 2 | 1 | |
| | | | | | | |

Table 4

2020 Student Demographic Percentage Data as Reported to the IPEDS by Each Institution (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

| | Institution | | WPACC1 | WPACC2 | WPACC3 | |
|--|------------------------------------|--|--------|--------|--------|--|
| | | | | | | |
| | Demographics | | | | | |
| | American Indian | | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| | Asian | | 3 | 1 | 1 | |
| | African-American | | 16 | 2 | 3 | |
| | Hispanic/Latino | | 3 | 3 | 2 | |
| | Hawaiian-American/Pacific Islander | | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| | White | | 60 | 68 | 89 | |
| | Two or More Races | | 3 | 1 | 4 | |
| | Race/Ethnicity Unknown | | 13 | 25 | 0 | |
| | Female | | 54 | 63 | 63 | |
| | Male | | 46 | 37 | 37 | |

Participants

The recruitment of participants was pursued from within the business school at each community college. The business discipline was selected because it typically boasts one of the largest faculty groups, providing a larger pool of potential participants. The goal was for five participants from each location to be included in the sample; however, there was only one college that produced five participants while the other two produced three each. Demographic data was collected from the participants because it was of analytical value; however, the primary focus was on online teaching experiences. The participants were all assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The participants in this study, selected through purposive sampling, had all taught completely online courses for at least three years and were all teaching at least three online courses per semester in the selected setting. This experience with online education was necessary for the participants to provide meaningful data. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the use of purposive sampling enables researchers to collect responses from participants with better insight into the research topic, allowing for more accurate results. There are four community colleges in the considered setting, but participants were only selected three of them to ensure the production of an ethical study (as I, as the researcher, have a professional relationship with the fourth community college in the area). Such ethical considerations are essential to the integrity and validity of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researcher Positionality

I believe that this research is important because I believe that education can provide people with opportunities to change their lives for the better. I have personally experienced the

life-changing benefits of having access to a high-quality education through the convenience of online courses. I have attended completely online degree programs throughout my educational career for both my undergraduate and graduate degrees. The findings of this study may provide community colleges with the ability to formulate strategies that result in higher rates of student retention. There are four community colleges in western Pennsylvania, each of which has experienced a significant decline in student retention in recent years while needing to simultaneously adapt and implement distance education models (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Sousa, 2021; Wolinsky, 2020).

In addition, faculty have had to grow and develop alongside modern technologies to provide students with an impactful education. These faculty have had a front-row seat to the implementation of various educational modalities. However, given modern changes in online teaching and attendance requirements, it is vital to collect and understand faculty perceptions of completely online instruction to improve the education provided to the diverse body of students in western Pennsylvania (Liu et al., 2020). There is little to no empirical research on faculty perceptions regarding completely asynchronous and synchronous educational modalities and their impact on student retention. By synthesizing faculty responses to apply toward student retention strategies, I believe that I effectively captured faculty perspectives in a way that may bolster institutional strategies aimed at promoting student retention.

Interpretive Framework

This study made use of a social constructivist interpretive framework. Through this framework, the research can pursue a greater understanding of the world in which they live and work, assigning meanings constructed from their experiences. Social constructivism holds that

knowledge comes from shared social interactions and, therefore, shared lived experiences rather than individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

More specifically, this study made use of Max Van Manen's approach to the interpretive framework. Max Van Manen (1990) was an educator who wrote about hermeneutical phenomenology and posited that such studies are relevant to lived experiences and interpretations of the "texts" of life. Regarding his approach, Van Manen asserts that, as the researcher has a significant personal interest in the subject of their study, they will be able to reflect on the collected data and derive valuable themes from it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process enables the researcher to balance and interpret the collected data, assigning meaning to shared lived experiences. This interpretive framework aligns with the nature of hermeneutical phenomenology research studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is through the stages of the qualitative research process that I was able to obtain information, examine it on multiple occasions, and formulate an understanding of the phenomena under study and the ways in which they related to my identified research problem, purpose, and research questions.

Philosophical Assumptions

My values and beliefs are inherent components of me as a human being, and these factors have likely influenced how I conducted this study as a researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, it is important to be transparent about my underlying values and belief systems to facilitate a fair interpretation of my findings. Ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions are those that likely influenced my conduct of this research project.

Ontological Assumption

An ontological assumption is related to the nature of reality—the reality that is able to be observed and measured (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My ontological assumption is that there is only one genuine reality that is based on God and His creation of the world. I believe that there is one creator of the world—God—and that this one and only God is our father and creator. He has provided us with everything that composes us as physical beings with unique souls. Although I understand that many may disagree with this point of view, it is still important to truthfully convey my values and beliefs, as this was an interpretive study. While conducting this research project, I kept in mind that others may not share my perceptions of reality and factored this awareness into my conduct of the study.

Epistemological Assumption

Under the epistemological assumption, a researcher needs to get as close as possible to the selected participants so that their subjective views and experiences can be interpreted as data knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My knowledge and experiences with online education were a factor in selecting this research topic. My life-changing experience with online education makes me value it, and I want those who may not know about or understand it to have the opportunity to do so. I believe that higher education can open doors for people, including those who thought college was never a possibility for them. Conducting this research with faculty who have knowledge about and experience with completely online education provided me with substantiated evidence of their perceptions of asynchronous and synchronous education as they relate to student retention. Lastly, this collection of data has external validation factors that I believe are important to justify this study's knowledge claims. Faculty members must be

educated and trained not only in their subject matter but also in the technologies related to online learning modalities if they are teaching at an accredited institution that provides online learning. Higher education institutions must be accredited by a regulating body to provide educational services, so the foundations of their academic programs and institutional soundness are validated on a regular basis.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption is that the researcher's personal beliefs, experiences, values, and world beliefs will impact not only the research questions used to collect data but also the themes developed during the data-analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I wholeheartedly believe that community colleges and online education can change lives for the better—and I believe in changing lives, as doing so can then change communities, regions, countries, and the world. Determining how online education can be leveraged to aid students in persisting in their academic pursuits is critical. It is vital to provide students with the best education path possible for them, offering them platforms to make attending and persisting in college personally feasible. Understanding what works well with completely asynchronous and synchronous education and what areas warrant improvement can help change the world, person by person.

Researcher's Role

As the researcher, I developed and carried out this research project. Although it was supervised by my dissertation committee and I was required to obtain specific permissions for and during the study, it is important to understand that I brought my values, ideas, and beliefs to this study so that any potential biases can be acknowledged and considered when reviewing my findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I do not have any personal or professional relationships with

any of the individuals or institutions covered in this study, though I was previously familiar with the institutions.

As the human instrument for this study, I brought to it certain assumptions and values related to higher education, online education, and student retention. Acknowledging these assumptions and values ensures the transparency of the research and, in turn, provides for an ethical approach. Other personal factors that may have influenced my conduct of the study include my experiences as a doctoral candidate who attends class completely through asynchronous education. I am also an administrator at another community college in western Pennsylvania (the one that was not considered in this study), and this fact certainly impacts me in my role as researcher given my professional experiences with both online education and the issue of student retention. As an individual, I have had experiences that may have influenced how I perceived the collected data; acknowledging my personal and professional experiences was necessary to disclose potential influences on me as a researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to ethical considerations, I did not collect any data from the one institution where I work that is located in the region of interest.

Procedures

The procedures for this qualitative study are outlined below. Prior to any research being conducted by me as a doctoral student at Liberty University, a series of permissions and detailed plans needed to be developed and accomplished. Additionally, I had to follow all established requirements within the parameters set by the institution.

Permissions

After I completed my research proposal—Chapters One, Two, and Three—I needed approval from my dissertation committee and Liberty University’s Qualitative Research Director to move forward. Upon receiving approval to move forward, I also obtained permission from Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (Appendix A) to proceed with my study. I also needed to get approval from the Institutional Review Board of each considered community college on Liberty University’s approval forms and provide them to Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board prior to conducting any proper research. Prior to visiting any site for the study, I also obtained any other permissions required by the considered individual institutions, such as their presidents, provosts, and deans to ensure the proper treatment of all human participants in this study as well as an appropriate research methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Recruitment Plan

To recruit participants after securing Institutional Review Board approval at each community college, I worked with them to contact faculty within their business schools to secure three to five participants from each institution. I initiated contact by telephone and then followed up with an email to express appreciation and recap our discussion.

A total of ten to 15 faculty members total was the desired sample size for this study (the maximum of 15 being set by Liberty University guidelines). Notably, 15 participants is considered to be a sufficient number of participants to reach saturation of the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The number of participants is important when it comes to collecting the right amount of data for a meaningful study. Too few participants will fail to provide enough

data to develop themes that accurately represent the shared phenomena, while the inclusion of too many exceeds the point of saturation—at which all possible useful data has been secured—and results in a significant amount of superfluous data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A total of 11 participants were successfully recruited for this research study, meeting the minimum of ten participants but failing to reach the desired 15. Still, the 11 participants provided rich and bountiful data for analysis. Informed consent forms (Appendix D) were emailed to participants one week prior to planned activities alongside a request for them to be completed, signed, and returned within 72 hours from the point of receipt. The consent forms included all of the necessary components for a structured research process, including information on the reasons behind the study, the recipients of the results of the study, how participants' information will be protected and secured, and an acknowledgment that participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time.

This study used a purposeful sample of the total faculty populations from the three considered community colleges. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a purposeful sample provides the researcher with higher-quality data—and, in turn, more accurate results—through the inclusion of participants who are more knowledgeable and experienced in the relevant field. Due to the cyclical nature of the academic year, business school faculty members were selected because the nature of the courses within business programs lends themselves well to online instruction because multiple sections of business courses are typically offered each semester at the community colleges.

Data-Collection Plan

To conduct a qualitative research study on faculty perceptions of completely asynchronous and synchronous online educational modalities and their impact on student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania, multiple data-collection methods were employed. Semi-structured individual interviews were the primary data source for this study, as individual interviews were able to provide a rich environment for the collection of meaningful data from individuals with shared lived experiences of completely online education. Although interviews are the best primary source of data in hermeneutical phenomenology, there remains a need to have additional data-collection methods planned to ensure a comprehensive assessment of the phenomenon under study. Additional data-collection methods add to the structure of the research and provide data that may either support or invalidate some of the data collected in the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The two other data-collection methods used in this study were focus groups and document reviews. The collection of data from three sources allowed for the triangulation of collected data, providing cross-verification as well as deeper insight into the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I worked with each institution to contact faculty within their business schools and secure at least five participants from each institution. While five were not secured at each institution, the minimum goal of at least three participants at each institution and ten participants in total was achieved. Once the faculty members were selected, I called them to introduce myself, schedule a 60-minute semi-structured interview and a focus group, and ask them to submit and list of documents relevant to the study.

Individual Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used in the individual data-collection process. In other words, I asked each participant a set of open-ended questions while maintaining the flexibility to ask unique follow-up questions that probe participants' responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The set of interview questions was approved for validity by the dissertation committee. Notably, the questions were based on the gathered empirical literature. All interviews were conducted in person to allow for the observation of non-verbal cues and provide a comfortable environment for the participants. If an in-person interview was not possible, a virtual face-to-face interview was held in its place using Microsoft Teams. The interview questions started out as fairly general but progressively became more specific. However, they remained open-ended to allow the participants to express their original thoughts on their lived experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) note that the strategy endorsed by Marshall and Rossman (2012) is vital: the interview process should begin by putting participants at ease, allowing them to take us on the participant tour regarding the phenomenon. Following the initial collection and analysis of the data, a new set of follow-up questions would have been created to ask the participants if necessary, and the dissertation committee would have needed to approve these questions as well before meeting with the participants again. Ultimately, however, follow-up interviews were not needed.

Individual interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me as if for the first time.

Opening

2. Tell me why you decided to teach at a community college.

Opening

3. Have you always taught online courses?

Opening

4. Describe your experiences with synchronous online education.

CRQ

5. Describe how you structure your synchronous courses.

SQ1

6. Describe the methods of communication utilized in your synchronous courses.

SQ2

7. Describe how you view student autonomy in completely synchronous education.

SQ3

8. Tell me about your perspective on student success in your completely synchronous courses.

CRQ

9. Describe your experiences with asynchronous online education.

CRQ

10. Describe how you structure your asynchronous courses.

SQ1

11. Describe the methods of communication utilized in your asynchronous courses.

SQ2

12. Describe how you view student autonomy in completely asynchronous education.

SQ3

13. Tell me about your perspective on student success in your completely asynchronous courses.

CRQ

The questions listed above are critical to the core interest of understanding faculty perceptions of completely online education and its impact on student retention. The questions start off as fairly general—allowing the participants to provide me with their overall view on a topic as well as their personal background and experience in the field—before becoming more specific, delving into the theoretical framework of the study (see Appendix F). This study used Michael G. Moore’s transactional distance theory (1997) as its theoretical framework.

Transactional distance theory highlights three key components as critical to online education: student autonomy, structure, and communication. This study was primarily guided by the chosen theoretical framework through the interview and focus group questions.

Individual Interview Data-Analysis Plan

Max Van Manen’s (1990) approach to qualitative research—one linked to the human sciences that is useful to researchers interested in andragogy—influenced the design and interpretation of this hermeneutical phenomenological study. This interpretive approach consists of four components of phenomenological lived experiences: lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relations. Evidently, this interpretive approach to the shared lived experiences of faculty was an appropriate choice for this research.

The data collected during the individual interviews was transcribed from the interview recordings to facilitate the next steps in the data-analysis process. A research journal was kept during the data-analysis process to minimize the risk of researcher bias. Once all the data for

each participant was transcribed, the next step was to decipher the data transcribed into important segments. The next step in the data-analysis phase was to split the transcribed data into distinct segments, which were then coded using descriptive terms that allowed me to find threads or patterns among the data segments to construct themes.

The codes I used served to interpret the collected data in a way that assigned it meaning and offered explanations; codes constitute the links between the collected data and their interpretive translations (Saqlain, 2021). I went through the qualitative coding process three times to refine and synthesize the collected data until the codes were able to be processed into themes. This multiple-round coding process was done in an Excel spreadsheet to track and advance the interpretation and data-analysis processes. The themes were triangulated with the data collected from the other two data sources to establish theories. After the themes were developed, the interpretation of the data was validated for accuracy by asking the participants to do a member check to review and validate my interpretation of the data that they provided.

Document Review Data-Collection Approach

Each participant was asked to submit available syllabi, lesson plans, module plans, assignment instructions, and test or quiz copies. These documents were relevant to the research, as they provided information on the structure of online courses, the communication methods employed in them, and the level of student autonomy enabled by them. The documents were examined to add context and clarity to the primary data collected through interviews and focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These faculty-created documents helped to answer the central research question as well as the secondary research questions by detailing various course elements. The data collected from these documents were analyzed with a focus on how faculty

sought to engage students in order to boost student persistence. Some of the collected documents, such as study guides and tutorials, even identified when faculty perceived a student to be disengaged or unable to comprehend the course material. The words in these documents were extracted to develop relevant themes, which then served to analyze the phenomena under study.

Document Review Data-Analysis Plan

The data collected from the were triangulated with the collected interview and focus group data. Throughout the data-analysis process, I maintained my research journal to identify and minimize any potential biases. The first step in analyzing the document data was to divide the documents into categories (e.g., syllabi, tests and quizzes, lesson and module plans) before reviewing them for data relevant to the research questions.

The data from the documents was placed in segments on an Excel spreadsheet so that the data could be coded in a manner similar to that collected through personal interviews. The same codes were used through both rounds of coding to begin synthesizing the document data. The coded data was then divided into themes aligned with the data from the individual interviews and focus groups. The themes from all three data-collection processes were sent to the participants for member review and validation to ensure that my analysis and interpretation accurately reflected the participants' contributions.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are frequently used in qualitative studies to gather data from participants in a collective setting. Responses to questions, body language, participant interactions, and other verbal and non-verbal cues can all provide valuable insight (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, three focus groups were used to gather additional data relevant to the research questions.

There was one focus group for each institution consisting of the participants at that institution and held at that institution. Open-ended questions were developed to stimulate discussion during the focus groups (also see Appendix G). These developed questions were reviewed and approved by the dissertation committee prior to the start of the research process. Open-ended questions helped to obtain as much original data from the participants as possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus groups were recorded so that the discussions could be transcribed for analysis.

Focus Group Questions

1. Starting with the person to my right, please introduce yourself to the group as if you are meeting each of them for the first time.

Opening

2. Tell me about what factors you consider when you develop your online courses.

CRQ

3. Do you develop your courses differently for in-person and online courses?

CRQ

4. Tell me about your perspective on what is needed in the structure of an online course to ensure students have the best chance of success in the course.

CRQ

5. Tell me about your perspective on what elements of an online course are needed to ensure student persistence.

CRQ

6. Tell me about how students are successfully prepared for completely online teaching and learning.

SQ2

7. Please describe your point of view regarding completely synchronous and asynchronous education.

CRQ

8. Describe how you believe completely synchronous and asynchronous education impacts today's students' needs and expectations.

SQ1

9. Tell me your ideas of how completely online education can be improved to best meet student needs and expectations.

SQ2

10. Tell me about student retention at your institution.

CRQ

11. Tell me your perception of completely online teaching and learning as it pertains to student retention.

SQ1

12. Tell me how you believe your improvement ideas may also impact student retention.

SQ2

13. Describe any other thoughts, ideas, or perspectives regarding completely asynchronous and synchronous education related to student retention.

CRQ

Focus Group Analysis Plan

The data collected during the focus groups was transcribed from the recordings. This initial step was necessary so that the next data-analysis steps were possible. The research journal continued to be kept during the data-analysis process to minimize the risk of researcher bias. Once all of the data for each focus group was transcribed, the next step in the data-analysis phase was to split the transcribed data into distinct segments, which were then coded using descriptive terms that allowed me to find threads or patterns among the data segments to construct themes. Additionally, notes taken during the focus group focused on non-verbal communication (e.g., body language), while group dynamics were similarly deciphered as non-verbal communications.

The codes I used served to interpret the collected data in a way that assigned it meaning and offered explanations; codes constitute the links between the collected data and their interpretive translations (Saqlain, 2021). I went through the qualitative coding process three times to refine and synthesize the collected data until the codes were able to be processed into themes. This multiple-round coding process was done in an Excel spreadsheet to track and advance the interpretation and data-analysis processes. The themes were triangulated with the data collected from the other two data sources to establish theories. After the themes were developed, the interpretation of the data was validated for accuracy by asking the participants to do a member check to review and validate my interpretation of the data that they provided.

Max Van Manen's approaches to the analysis of lived sharedness, "lived space," "lived body," "lived time," and "lived human relations" were integrated (Van Manen, 1990). Once the individual interviews, focus groups, and documents were analyzed and validated, I analyzed the data from each source to triangulate the proper interpretation of data from each source. This data,

along with my research journal, were kept over the course of the research path, enabling me to triangulate the data to synthesize it into theories, conclusions, and recommendations. Once all data points from the interviews, focus groups, and documents were coded at least twice, funneled into themes, and validated through member review, an analysis was ready for synthesis. In addition to providing theories, conclusions, and recommendations, this study's data-analysis process provided insight into the gaps in the literature and topics that could be addressed by further research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Synthesis

In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, the data I collected enabled me to identify the meaning of the shared lived experiences of related phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Employing Max Van Manen's (1990) approach to data analysis and synthesis entailed the incorporation of four areas of lived sharedness: "lived space," "lived body," "lived time," and "lived human relations." After coding all of the collected data at least twice, funneling it into themes, and validating it through member review, a comprehensive data analysis culminated in the interpreted synthesized findings. The synthesized findings aided in finding answers to the research questions, and the theories developed through this synthesis filled in some of the gaps identified in the literature to better understand the phenomenon at hand and provide recommendations for future research.

Trustworthiness

Shenton (2004) explains that qualitative research has often been questioned over its supposed lack of rigor validity, and reliability relative to quantitative research. In response to these criticisms from positivists regarding the trustworthiness of qualitative research, Shenton

explains that the constructs of E.G. Guba attempted to establish the trustworthiness parallel between qualitative research and quantitative research through four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section describes the procedures that I employed to ensure that a rigorous study was conducted.

Credibility

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is one of the most important components in establishing the trustworthiness of a study. A study must have the internal validity expected of academic research in order for it and its results to have meaning (Shenton, 2004). One of the key aspects of establishing credibility is ensuring that the study is measuring the intended object of the study and that all mechanisms in place to carry out the study support the alignment between the intended objects of study and the findings. Several mechanisms may be employed to ensure the credibility of a research study. The mechanisms used in this study were as follows: (a) well-established research methods; (b) knowledge of the organizational culture of the participants; (c) purposive sampling; (d) triangulation; (e) assisting in ensuring participant honesty; (f) iterative questioning; (g) frequent debriefing sessions; (h) reflective commentary; (i) qualified and experienced investigator; (j) member checks; (k) thick descriptions of the phenomenon of the study; and (l) an examination of prior research findings (Shenton, 2004). The combined use of these mechanisms provided for a rich combination of checkpoints to ensure the validation and reliability of the study. It is the combination of mechanisms that provided validation.

Transferability

Transferability is primarily concerned with how well research elements can be transferred to other research studies (Shenton, 2004). The ability to apply research elements to other studies provides additional trustworthiness to my study. Of course, it is important to understand that I cannot guarantee the transferability of my research to others' studies; I do not mean to insinuate or infer any level of transferability. To aid in determining whether my research may have transferability to other studies, I have provided a thick description of the studied phenomena to provide readers with a full understanding of the phenomena at the center of the study. In addition to describing the phenomena, I also detail the boundaries in which my study was conducted to allow other researchers to determine whether my scope could interfere with transferability (Shenton, 2004). These boundaries include: (a) the number and location of participating organizations; (b) any restrictions on participants; (c) the number of participants involved in fieldwork; data-collection methods; (d) the number and duration of data-collection sessions; (e) the time period for data collection (Shenton, 2004, p. 70). To promote the transferability of my research, I have ensured that all of its boundaries are documented and clearly identifiable within the body of my work.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the ability to replicate the research study and achieve similar or the same results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dependability through replication is achieved first and foremost by providing a very detailed description of the instruments and processes used to collect and analyze the data (Shenton, 2004), which enables researchers in the future to successfully duplicate the study. Changing circumstances may contribute to research studies that

have been replicated, resulting in varied overall results. My research study has been reviewed for dependability through an inquiry audit by my dissertation committee and Liberty University's Qualitative Research Director.

Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to the objectivity of the study (Stenton, 2004). To ensure that I have presented an accurate reflection of the data provided by the participants without interference by my thoughts or biases, specific measures were taken to provide an acceptable level of objectivity. To establish confirmability, I provided a rich description of the relevant instruments, processes, data, and analysis. In addition, it was essential to triangulate the data from the various data-collection methodologies used in the research. Detailing my own beliefs and biases, delineating the limitations of my research, and employing an audit trail served to achieve confirmability. The audit trail was accomplished (presented using a diagram) through the observer of the research project being able to replicate the whole study by following the documented processes and decisions.

Ethical Considerations

Many processes were incorporated into my research plan to ensure that my research study was conducted in an ethical manner. This included obtaining approval from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board as well as permissions from my dissertation committee. I also needed to obtain permission from authorities at the sites housing my participants. The Liberty University Institutional Review Board approval form was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at each participant site.

Consent forms were required to be prepared and sent to each participant prior to the start of data collection to provide them with critical information on the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), including the fact that participation in the study was voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time. Other factors worth noting here include the fact that this study was conducted confidentially and that all participants and organizations were given pseudonyms. The participants were also informed of why the study is being conducted and how the results were used. No one participated in the study without having returned a signed consent form.

Disclosure of how the collected data was secured and for how long was essential. The data collected in my research study continues to be locked electronically within a dedicated computer, and hard copies remain in a locked filing cabinet. I acknowledged that I will keep the data stored for a period of three years from the approval of my dissertation.

Other ethical dilemmas may arise during a research study. Were other ethical dilemmas to arise, I had planned to seek guidance from my dissertation committee. Fully disclosing ethical matters and addressing them clearly lays the foundation for an ethical research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

This qualitative research project entailed a hermeneutic phenomenological study aimed at understanding the faculty perspective on the impact of completely asynchronous and synchronous online education on student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. This study was conducted to fill a worrisome gap in the literature on how completely asynchronous and synchronous online education can be leveraged in the development of strategies to improve student retention. Max Van Manen's (1990) approach to hermeneutical

phenomenology was selected to guide this study's design and interpretations. According to Max Van Manen, a hermeneutic study is effective for those interested in how knowledge is imparted to students. Van Manen's theory maintains that there are four components of a phenomenological lived experience.

Three different data-collection methods were used to conduct this study: individual interviews with 11 faculty members within the business schools at three community colleges in western Pennsylvania, focus groups with those same participants, and a review of relevant documents submitted by the participants. Each method had a set of parameters formulated and approved before the start of any research. All questions asked during the interviews and focus groups were granted approval by Liberty University before research began. Each dataset had an analysis plan consistent with a qualitative research study. All of the individual interviews were conducted in person at the participants' workplaces. If in-person interviews were not possible, Microsoft Teams was used in its place. All of the interviews were recorded. All data collected and analyzed will continue to be stored securely for three years. Data collected from the three collection methods was transcribed, coded, and funneled into themes before being synthesized to develop theories, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

The interpretive framework for this study was social constructivism, a framework focused on the world in which people live and work. Notably, this chapter provided information on my values and belief systems along with any potential biases that I may have had throughout this research project to ensure full transparency and avoid anything inappropriate. The trustworthiness of the research project must not be compromised. Finally, this chapter addressed all ethical considerations as well as the findings' transferability, credibility, and dependability.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to assess and describe the perceptions and experiences of faculty members teaching asynchronous and/or synchronous online courses at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. Multiple themes were identified through the synthesis of interviews, focus groups, and document analysis centered around online teaching and learning. This chapter describes the participants as well as the narrative themes that were identified through the data-collection and data-analysis processes. Charts and tables are included to aid the reader in interpreting the identified narrative themes. Sample research question responses as well as notable outlier data are included to provide a comprehensive understanding of the findings.

Participants

As noted in Chapter Three, the desired number of participants to be recruited for this study was five from each of three sites, prompting a maximum total of 15 participants and a minimum total of ten participants. The recruitment process took considerable time and effort to attract the necessary number of participants, even with a gift card offered as an incentive. Ultimately, 11 participants were recruited as participants, exceeding the Liberty University minimum of ten to ensure that a sufficient amount of data is collected. Representation was achieved for each site. Table 5 below provides information on each participant using pseudonyms.

Table 5

Faculty Participants

| Faculty Participant | Years Taught | Taught Only at Community College (CC)/CC or Also at Four-Year Colleges (Both) | Taught at One or Multiple Institutions | Career Outside of Higher Ed |
|---------------------|--------------|---|--|-----------------------------|
| Gary | 10+ | Both | Multiple | Yes |
| Sam | 3–5 | Both | Multiple | Yes |
| Carol | 3–5 | CC | One | Yes |
| Sarah | 10+ | CC | One | Yes |
| Jodi | 40+ | CC | One | No |
| Bill | 30+ | CC | One | Yes |
| Doug | 10+ | Both | Multiple | Yes |
| Linda | 20+ | CC | One | No |
| Henry | 10+ | Both | Multiple | No |
| Ashley | 3–5 | CC | One | Yes |
| Richard | 30+ | Both | Multiple | Yes |

Gary

Gary began his career in the private sector before gradually incorporating teaching at higher education institutions into his career. He is currently a faculty member but had previously worked as an administrative employee. Gary has more than 10 years of higher education teaching experience across multiple institutions. He also has vast experience at both four-year residential institutions and community colleges. Gary teaches both in-person and online courses.

He currently teaches at a community college, where he is devoted to his institution and the community it serves.

Sam

Sam had been in the technology industry for most of his career prior to his time in higher education. Still, Sam maintains his professional job while teaching. He only teaches online courses. Sam has taught virtually for the past three and a half years at two different institutions, one a four-year residential institution and the other a community college. Sam also participates as an advisor and coach at the community college where he currently teaches.

Carol

Carol works full-time in a public service position while teaching part-time at her community college. She has taught in higher education for just over three years. Carol has taught both in-person and online courses. She has a strong preference for in-person courses because she enjoys the human element of the in-person modality. At some point in her future career, she would like to teach full-time at a community college.

Sarah

Sarah began her career in the private sector. She worked in her industry as a professional for more than two decades but gave up her professional career to teach full-time at a community college. Through her own personal experiences attending both a community college and a four-year institution, she is inspired to give to others what she was able to experience during her academic career. Sarah has always had a deep desire to teach and decided to devote herself to full-time collegiate teaching. She has taught both in-person and online courses.

Jodi

Jodi has taught for over 40 years through both online and in-person courses and is dedicated to her students. As a previously non-traditional student, Jodi understands the need for alternative modalities to meet the needs of modern students. As one of the instrumental parties in establishing the online modality at her institution, she prides herself on providing a thorough online learning experience for her students. She has no intention to move on to a career outside of higher education or to teach beyond the community college level.

Bill

Bill had a long career in the private sector and began teaching part-time while in his professional position before eventually shifting to a full-time teaching position. Bill has taught at the same community college for over 30 years and has significant experience teaching both in-person and online courses. He goes above and beyond to seek feedback from his students about his teaching approach. He always wants to emphasize what is working well and modify the student experience if necessary. Bill plans to teach for the remainder of his career.

Doug

Doug has taught at both the community college and four-year institution levels for more than ten years while working in other industries. He has a broad range of experience across multiple sectors and higher education institutions. Doug has a strong desire to work in a full-time teaching position at a community college. His passion for teaching at the community college level is greatly influenced by the success that he has witnessed among his students. Doug fully embraces the online course modality and believes that it is crucial for many people to change their lives.

Linda

Linda has taught full-time at the community college level for more than 20 years. She was one of the pioneers behind the establishment of distance education at her institution. While teaching full-time at her current college, she has been invited to temporarily assume various administrative roles. Although she enjoyed learning the different aspects of college administration, she plans to continue teaching full-time at her community college for the remainder of her career. Linda has significant experience with both in-person and online teaching. She believes that, so long as students are properly prepared for it, distance education constitutes a strong modality for students for whom attending college courses in the traditional manners may be difficult.

Henry

Henry has taught at both community colleges and four-year universities for his entire career dating back over a decade. Henry has significant experience teaching both in-person and online courses and sees the need for and benefits of both. Henry indicates that both asynchronous and synchronous courses represent more work for faculty than in-person courses but that developing a sound structure that fits the course topic and creating flexible templates for future use can minimize the extra work involved. Henry plans to continue teaching full-time for the remainder of his career.

Ashley

Ashley has four years of experience teaching at the community college level as well as some brief experience in the private sector. However, teaching is her passion. Ashley has experience with both in-person and online modalities. She is very interested in monitoring how

distance education modalities develop over time alongside changes in the world. While Ashley plans to teach for the remainder of her foreseeable career, she would be open to learning and trying other aspects of college operations. Watching her students succeed makes Ashley feel rewarded in her career.

Richard

In addition to working full-time in the private sector, Richard has taught at both the community college and four-year university levels for more than 30 years. He currently teaches full-time at a community college while teaching part-time at a four-year institution. [CD1] Richard has significant online teaching experience and has a strong preference for the online modality over in-person classes. His preferences are attributable to his own busy lifestyle; he notes that the online modality allows him to relate particularly well with students who have priorities competing with their college work. He has found that students who enroll in his online courses seek him out as an instructor in their future courses. Richard believes that his course structure and the way in which he manages the online class environment are significant factors in his students returning to his online classes.

Results

Through multiple coding cycles with the data collected from 11 individual interviews, three focus groups, and 33 documents, four overarching codes emerged: awareness, competence, framework, and interaction. A total of 3,802 codes were identified for theme development, with 2,026 of them stemming from individual interviews. See Appendix E for a sample coded individual interview transcript. The focus groups resulted in 556 codes. See Appendix F for a sample coded focus group transcript. The analysis of relevant documents (e.g., syllabi, tests,

lesson plans) resulted in 1,220 codes. See Appendices G, H, and I for a sample code of each document type. All identifiable information was removed from each sample. Please see Table 6 for the breakdown of codes for each data-collection method.

Table 6

Source Types and Number of Codes

| Data-Collection Method | Number of Codes |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Individual Interviews | 2,026 |
| Focus Groups | 556 |
| Syllabi | 848 |
| Tests | 116 |
| Lesson Plans or Other Documents | 256 |
| All Sources | 3,802 |

Three themes and ten sub-themes emerged from the coding process (See Table 7). The first theme is preparedness with the sub-themes of lack of student readiness, faculty readiness for online teaching, and student engagement. The second theme is community with the sub-themes of faculty acting in loco parentis, communication is paramount, faculty vs. administrative input, and data for decision-making. The third theme is lack of access with the sub-themes of impacts of COVID-19, ability to pivot, and lack of infrastructure. These themes aided in answering the central and secondary research questions of this study.

Table 7

Themes and Sub-Themes

| Theme | Sub-Theme One | Sub-Theme Two | Sub-Theme Three | Sub-Theme Four |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Theme One: Preparedness | Lack of Student Readiness | Faculty Readiness for Online Teaching | Student Engagement | |
| Theme Two: Community | Faculty Acting In Loco Parentis | Communication is Paramount | Faculty vs. Administrative Input | Data for Decision-Making |
| Theme Three: Lack of Access | Impacts of COVID-19 | Ability to Pivot | Lack of Infrastructure | |

Theme One: Preparedness

Preparedness is the first theme that emerged through the data analysis process. Components of preparedness appeared across all three data sources from most participants. It was most evident in the individual participant interviews and focus groups. Three sub-themes consisting of 1,367 codes underlie the overarching theme of preparedness: lack of student readiness, faculty readiness for online teaching, and student engagement. All 11 participants provided statements during both individual interviews and focus groups that supported a myriad of areas of preparedness that must be met for students to be successful in a completely online

learning modality. The data from participants supports the idea that overall preparedness among faculty and students for online education is paramount to student success and retention.

Lack of Student Readiness

According to the faculty, students must be adequately prepared for online learning to achieve success and bolster overall student retention. Through individual interviews, ten of the 11 participants noted the substantial lack of preparation demonstrated by first-year students across all college courses. During individual interviews and focus groups, the participants stated several times that many students perform exceedingly well in high school but are unprepared for college work. Gary emphasized, “Many high school graduates are not ready for entry-level college.” Notably, the four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction all identified under the sub-theme of lack of readiness, and a total of 556 codes combined to form the sub-theme. The faculty expressed considerable concern that many students are not only ill-prepared for college courses but also notably unprepared for online courses. Richard asserted that “advisors need to ensure through a checklist or something that students know what they are getting into by taking an online class, especially if they never have before. Too many advisors offer online registration to students to fill a schedule.” The participants believe that most students do not understand exactly what is expected of them in online courses but are frequently registered for them regardless. According to Ashley, “In general, students are not prepared for online success. They are arriving without a firm grasp of online educational requirements.” Students need to be provided earlier with information on what is required to achieve educational success online.

Faculty Readiness for Online Teaching

According to the participants, faculty need significantly more time to prepare themselves and course materials in order to provide high-quality educational experiences through both asynchronous and synchronous modalities. Again, the four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were all present under this sub-theme. In total, 317 codes collectively formed the sub-theme of faculty readiness for online teaching. When it comes to online courses, faculty have an enormous amount to consider when developing the structure and delivery of the course materials this data appeared through all three data collection methods of individual interviews, focus groups, and document review.

When a course is synchronous, the faculty member must consider the components missing from the in-person modality and find creative ways to incorporate them into the online course so that students are able to understand the material and find success in the online classroom. Jodi expressed, “When preparing my asynchronous and synchronous courses, I am doing double and triple the preparation work because, if I don’t, they won’t succeed.” Doug expressed that he is “a fan of online classrooms, but to make it work the way it is supposed to, faculty need the time and resources to adequately familiarize themselves with how to structure and manage the online classroom, and that isn’t easy.” In addition, during individual interviews and focus groups, it was evident the faculty believe that more training and development must be provided to faculty so that they are prepared to teach online in a way that matches the quality of their in-person course offerings. Ongoing training and development provide faculty with the essential tools that they need to develop an online course and adequately deliver it to students.

Without proper preparedness, the participants expressed that their ability to succeed in providing high-quality online education is likely to suffer.

Student Engagement

Without active engagement, students will not be successful in any course regardless of the modality. During the individual interviews, all 11 participants provided data that exemplifies the importance of student engagement. Notably, engagement consists of multiple components: attendance, participation in asynchronous and synchronous sessions, self-direction, dedication to watching or reading lectures, completion of assignments, and participation in discussions. Many students think that they can wade through an online course and be successful, but this could not be further from the truth. During the three focus group sessions, these same concerns were reiterated by participants. In his focus group, Bill provided “The need to find ways to engage students takes a multi-faceted approach. This includes offering them prompts at taking initiatives that may spur deeper interests in the subject of the course. I include opportunities for prompting interest by offering extra credit assignments students can take on to engage more on the topic. I also make note of this on my syllabus for each course.”

All 11 participants across the three data-collection methods expressed the need to urge students to engage in their courses so that they can be successful. Carol expressed a concern pertaining to engagement during the interview process that was also evident in the documents that she submitted: “If a student is not communicating with me as much as I would think is a normal level, but they are passing, how do I know if they are engaged or if someone else is doing their work?”

Many faculty remind their students that courses—including online courses—typically build on one another, meaning that a failure to engage in a single course can have long-term academic consequences. In his individual interview, Doug stated, “I tell my students that I will do my part to make you want to participate fully in class, but ultimately, you have to engage and ensure you are getting the knowledge you paid for.” The codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were all identified under this sub-theme. Overall, 494 codes combined to form the sub-theme of student engagement.

The participants noted in both individual interviews along with the focus groups that students do not engage if they do not understand the content and how to navigate the course. All of the 11 participants during their individual interviews expressed this mindset and a belief that, to be ready to engage, students must understand how to self-manage themselves in the course—and that preparation for this understanding must start in secondary education. Ashley noted that the students “do not know what they don’t know, and college courses, whether in person or online, take a different mindset and approach than high school.” Students must understand how to participate to the point of engagement, which includes being present, understanding how to navigate the class, knowing what is expected of them, and possessing the aptitude to understand the course topics. Without these fundamental components, students are unlikely to engage—and if they do not engage, they are unlikely to persist.

Theme Two: Community

Community is the second theme that emerged through the data-analysis process. All four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were present under this theme, and a total of 1,145 codes combined to form its underlying sub-themes: faculty acting in loco

parentis, faculty vs. administrative input, data for decision-making, and communication is paramount. Each of the participants suggested that they try to build a sense of community both through the instructional interactions, as well as within the documents they provide to students and were provided for data collection. In individual interviews, nine of the 11 participants spoke about community during the individual interviews, and it was a prominent topic during all three of the focus groups. The data indicates that, for students to want to engage (which would increase their likelihood of persistence), a sense of community is required. According to Sarah, “Students need to have a sense of belonging and community to feel invested in the online course and engage at a level where they learn.” The essence of community was also present in the submitted documents.

Faculty Acting in Loco Parentis

According to the participants, they often find themselves serving not just as educators but also in parental roles for many students. The faculty expressed that students frequently lack the knowledge or experience necessary to tackle new challenges in life, and many do not have support systems in place to help them, so faculty frequently step in to help. Higher education teachers—especially at the community college level—invest themselves in their students and build trusting bonds. This information was most prominent during individual interviews, but also was shared through focus group sessions. When reviewing documents submitted for review, it was evident in the level of formal and informal instructions that were present. In one of the documents submitted by Richard, he includes a statement that reads “While questions one through twenty are required, working on bonus questions is a practice that will carry you through farther in school and in life. Pushing yourself beyond the just required tasks will serve you well

in life.” Sarah shared, “frequently, when I check in with a student I feel is struggling, they share very intimate details of their life and ask for my guidance. It is sad to me that they don’t have the support structures in place at home to thrive.” All four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were present under this sub-theme, with a total of 295 codes combining to form the sub-theme of faculty acting in loco parentis.

Faculty vs. Administrative Input

Faculty expressed that most decisions made about online education modalities and other factors related to student education rest primarily with the college administration. They assert that the administration largely decides, without faculty input, everything from what programs are offered, how many sections of courses, modalities offered, tuition rates – just about every major area of the organization, including academic areas. In her individual interview, Jodi noted “My Dean has never been a faculty member and has never taught online or in-person classes. However, is in control of way too much of what I give my students. In the documents I emailed you, you have one of my tests. I prefer to rearrange test questions to help cut down on student cheating on tests; however, my Dean has required me to use test bank questions so she can keep things similarly structured for all courses. She doesn’t understand we see the students and what they need, my Dean does not.” During both his individual interview and focus group, Sam said, “I have no input on the decision-making that occurs for the academic segment of the institution.” Through individual interviews, focus group participation, and the submission of documents for review, The faculty provided data that collectively built the sub-theme faculty vs. administrative input. All four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were present under

this sub-theme, and a total of 239 codes combined to form the sub-theme of faculty vs. administrative input.

Data for Decision-Making

Faculty are invested in their students and want students' experiences in their online courses to be meaningful. They expressed needing to find effective course mechanisms themselves to identify what works and what doesn't in terms of student enrollment, engagement, and retention. This concern was evident through both individual and focus group interviews. Sam expressed frustration over the lack of data provided for faculty during his individual interview through the statement "We get told that we need to find ways to keep students in our courses and coming back. I'm not sure how we're supposed to be impactful at that when we don't get the data we need to make adjustments or make strategies to get them where they need to be and stay engaged. You can tell by the test document I submitted for review I go overboard with the number of questions because I'm not always sure what the overall weaknesses of students are, and if I have more comprehensive data, I can look for trends and make adjustments." They would like firm data on these matters so they can use it to make their online courses more meaningful for their students. Bill stated during a focus group, "I need the data so I can make the improvements and adjustments to my online courses to keep my students returning." The other participants in his focus group as well as those in the other focus groups agreed on the need for faculty to have meaningful data. All four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were present under this sub-theme. A total of 270 codes from across all three data sources combined to form the sub-theme of data for decision-making.

Communication is Paramount

Communication is essential for knowledge transfer to take place. The participating faculty placed significant emphasis on the methods of communication that they employ. Communication concerns were very evident through all three data collection methods. Linda, for example, shared, “I find every possible way I can to communicate with my online students. I also give them all of my contact information. This way, I’ve opened all channels I can for them.” Each of the participants reported using a blended approach to communicate with their students across all modalities. On her syllabus submitted for review, Ashley has in bold, multiple communication avenues for students to communicate with her and others at the institution. All four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were present under this sub-theme, and a total of 341 codes collectively formed the sub-theme of communication is paramount. According to Henry, “in the online education environment, communication becomes a key tool to assist students to grasp the content. In asynchronous [courses] in particular, the non-verbal cues are not able to be observed, so other methods of communication become even more vital.”

Theme Three: Lack of Access

A total of 1,290 codes were combined to build the sub-themes of impacts of COVID-19, ability to pivot, and lack of infrastructure to result in the theme of lack of access. All four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were found under each sub-theme. The faculty agree that lack of access has a substantial influence on student persistence. Through all three data collection methods, participants provided myriad examples of the lack of access students experienced. Richard shared, “I see students from many different backgrounds in my

courses, and the challenges they face to attend and stay in college are so great and varied, but [they] all primarily come back to some sort of obstacle or lack.” Through individual interviews and focus group participation, all 11 participants provided data that ultimately contributed to this theme, agreeing that a failure to address this lack in some way threatens to exacerbate student retention problems. Sarah expressed “You would not believe some of the obstacles and barriers our students have to education. They have responsibilities and barriers that most people at their institution have no idea about. It’s not through a lack of interest, but these students are not always able to express what is in their way because they just don’t know exactly what it is or how to express it.” As documents were submitted for the document review, seven of the 11 participants indicated that they now include on their syllabi a statement that reinforces resources for students that are outside of the norm for college students. Bill noted “On my syllabi, I always include numbers for outside agencies that may be of benefit to some of my students who come from at-risk populations. I don’t want them to have to ask for things, if they are uncomfortable, some of them are uneasy to tell others what they need, especially basic things like food.”

Impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 impacted all educational institutions from kindergarten through high school to higher education. The pandemic struck around the world without significant warning or any time to prepare for such a crisis in the field of education, and this period fundamentally changed the way in which professionals in the field of education thought about pedagogy and andragogy. Henry shared, “The pandemic created so much angst and confusion in higher education, and our students had stress and fear like never before and they needed something to be constant.” Through individual interviews, all of the 11 participants

emphasized the impact of COVID-19 on student retention. All four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were present under this sub-theme, 510 codes ultimately combined to form the impacts of COVID-19 sub-theme. Notably, the participants also shared through both individual interviews and focus groups that COVID-19 brought to light the need for schools at all levels to be prepared to conduct classes online at any time. They also routinely expressed that it was difficult for both themselves and their students to focus on education during the crisis, highlighting the importance of identifying and learning the lessons left of the COVID-19 pandemic to mitigate student retention issues moving forward and be prepared for any future crises.

Ability to Pivot

While some entirely online high schools exist, they remain rare; most are still in-person institutions. The faculty expressed that, when the entire world had to pivot to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift greatly impacted education. During individual interviews all 11 of the participants acknowledged that stakeholders in the field of education were in a state of crisis, forced to move full-time to a medium with which teachers, students, and parents had little experience. This was reinforced through the focus group discussions. Additionally, during the focus group discussions, the participants indicated the documents submitted for review have all been updated to provide greater ease should a situation that requires a quick change arises in the future. Carol shared, “The lack of experience with online modalities clearly moved the education of high school students behind, making the lack of preparation for community college even further behind.” While community colleges had several online modalities available, the need for a quick pivot was still highly difficult for most

institutions and their students. All four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were present under this sub-theme, and a total of 235 codes ultimately formed the ability to pivot sub-theme. The difficulty adjusting partially stemmed from a lack of sufficient technical equipment to serve the campus community, a lack of familiarity with online modalities among both faculty and students, and the lack of a set end point for the pandemic-era quarantines. Jodi noted, “If it were not for the highly skilled instructional designer at our institutions, we would not have been able to continue most courses, whether they started in the online modality or not.”

Lack of Infrastructure

All 11 of the participants provided data pointing to various kinds of infrastructure missing from communities who want a higher education but are dependent on online modalities. The faculty shared that there is a lack of wireless internet capabilities in many of the rural communities served by community colleges, a lack of hardware needed to attend online classes (e.g., computers), and lack of resources with which to teach and coach students who have little to no experience with the technology that would help current and potential students persist in higher education. All four codes of awareness, competence, framework, and interaction were present under this sub-theme, and a total of 545 codes combined to form the lack of infrastructure sub-theme. Sam mentioned, “I have a lot of experience with what resources are available and needed to adequately deliver a course through an online modality, and yet I was shocked at the delay in technology available for purchase and lack of internet options until we were forced to [be] fully remote by COVID.”

Outlier Data and Findings

While the vast majority of codes that formed the themes and sub-themes were consistent across the participants, as evidenced by the individual interviews, focus groups, and reviewed documents, there were two areas of discussion that stood out beyond the synthesized findings. These two outliers were the requirement to use cameras in online synchronous courses and artificial intelligence. While relevant to the research topic, they were not prominent enough to warrant consideration in the development of themes.

Cameras in Synchronous Online Courses

During both the individual and focus group interviews, just one of the participants expressed the belief that the use of cameras is a detriment to the online education process. Whereas the majority of participants indicated that requiring cameras to facilitate attendance and aid students in learning course materials is essential for students to be engaged and successful, one participant strongly disagreed with this sentiment. Doug believes that requiring cameras be on during a class may inhibit students from achieving success by making them uncomfortable with others seeing their circumstances at home. He elaborated, “I don’t feel like students must have their cameras on during a synchronous class because there could be a number of personal reasons a student doesn’t want the class to be able to see their living conditions.” However, ten of the 11 participants stressed the importance of using cameras to overcome the communication challenges that come alongside online courses and ensure a robust educational experience.

Artificial Intelligence is Here to Stay

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a hot topic across all sectors on account of how much it has to offer with its countless applications. As artificial intelligence becomes more prevalent, it will

become increasingly difficult to keep it out of professional and educational environments. As Gary indicated, “Students are going to find a way to use Chat GPT, and I am developing a way to teach my students how to use it responsibly and not in a way where the artificial intelligence is actually producing the work for them.” During the data-collection process, six of the 11 participants brought up artificial intelligence in the individual interview, and three of those six spoke about how students will use it to cheat given that students already find ways to cheat without it. The topic was briefly discussed in two of the three focus groups. Linda explained, “I already have to change all my test bank questions because students are smart enough to know how to use a search engine on their computers to find answers to test questions. AI is just going to make a new way for them to not really do the work.” While artificial intelligence was mentioned through the data-collection process, it did not fall under any of the developed themes or sub-themes.

Research Question Responses

This section answers this study’s central and sub-research questions. The themes developed through the data-collection and data-analysis processes informed the following responses, bringing to life the shared experiences of the participating faculty as they pertain to online teaching at community colleges and its impact on student retention.

Central Research Question

What are faculty’s perceptions of completely asynchronous and synchronous online education at community colleges in western Pennsylvania? All three of the main themes—preparedness, community, and lack of access—and their sub-themes contribute to the response to this question. The participants’ perception of completely asynchronous and synchronous

education at community colleges in western Pennsylvania is that it is necessary to meet the needs of modern students; however, there is a lot more work that needs to be done to help students successfully complete their online courses. Participants believe that it is important for students to be given a sense of what will be required of them academically before they even—virtually or physically—walk through the doors of a community college. In addition, institutions must invest in identifying obstacles that interfere with students' successful completion of their online education. According to Linda, "So many barriers to student success in the online environment exist, and if colleges want to ensure more student persistence and completion, more investment is needed to remove the barriers."

Sub-Question One

What level of student autonomy do faculty at community colleges in western Pennsylvania perceive to be sufficient in completely asynchronous or synchronous online education? All 11 of this study's participants expressed the belief that successful online students need to possess an above-average level of student autonomy. The theme of preparedness is the primary theme that provides an answer to sub-question one. As Carol noted, "Students are already beginning college courses with a lack of preparedness to truly engage in the college-level learning process. To be able to self-direct at an above-average level of the usual community college student, more investment in preparing them is needed." The first sub-theme of the theme of preparedness is lack of student readiness, the data behind which points directly to what is needed of students in terms of their readiness to engage in online learning. These needs include increased education on success in online courses, multiple communication methods, an organized and consistent course structure, and the ability to self-manage. In addition, the faculty

readiness for online teaching sub-theme bolsters the answer in that faculty need to be properly prepared to adequately teach an online course in which students can effectively use their self-direction to maneuver through the online course. The sub-theme of student engagement is also essential to students' ability to use autonomy in their courses. Without engagement, a student cannot be immersed in the course and is unlikely to be able to demonstrate autonomy.

Sub-Question Two

What online course structure do faculty at community colleges in western Pennsylvania establish to help ensure student success and perseverance? All three themes of preparedness, community, and lack of access have threads that contribute to answering sub-question two. However, the theme of community and each of its sub-themes—faculty acting in loco parentis, communication is paramount, faculty vs. administrative input, and data for decision-making—contribute to answering this structural question. The lack of infrastructure sub-theme under the theme of lack of access also provides data to help answer it.

Community college students enrolled in completely online learning in western Pennsylvania must be consistent, organized, and willing to work across several methods of communication. Students need a base structure in which they can reliably navigate coursework. Each participant provided data on how online courses need to be structured to help students achieve success and, in turn, persistence. Each participant also submitted a course syllabus to showcase the way in which they structure their online courses. These syllabi constituted a valuable visual source of data that demonstrated the structural efforts of the faculty. All of the participants also insisted that, for students to be successful, the online class must be well-organized and structured with as many tools as possible to help them achieve their academic

goals. According to Henry, “Online classes must have consistency, organization, and include small wins throughout the course to help students succeed and keep coming back.” Attention to online structure affords students the ability to focus on the core course material, and this focus provides them with a better chance of success. Gary noted, “We need to do everything we can as educators to take the confusion out of the online learning process, and how we systematically set up online courses as an institution can remove removes some of the barriers to achievement.”

Sub-Question Three

What communication methods do faculty at community colleges in western Pennsylvania use for completely online education? The sub-theme student engagement under the theme of preparedness, the sub-themes faculty acting in loco parentis and communication is paramount under the theme of community, and the sub-theme lack of infrastructure under the theme of lack of access all serve to answer sub-question three. A vast assortment of communication methods and styles are needed to capture and maintain the attention of community college students. Community colleges serve a diverse population of students with an equally diverse pool of needs and learning capabilities, meaning that high-quality education in these contexts requires the simultaneous use of multiple communication methods to cast a wide net and accommodate students’ learning styles. This approach is necessary for online education to be successful. Henry suggests, “I review all methods of communication I use each semester to see if I need to change my approach to communicating with students.”

Summary

Data was collected through three methods: individual interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. After the data was synthesized, a rigorous coding process led to the

development of three themes and 10 sub-themes. These steps led to the creation of a well-developed picture of faculty perceptions of completely asynchronous and synchronous online education modalities and their impact on student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. These themes and sub-themes facilitated responses to the central research question and the secondary research questions, offering insight into how faculty believe online student retention could be improved. One primary finding is there is a need for high schools and community colleges to better prepare students for online courses and what is required across both asynchronous and synchronous modalities. The data suggests that there needs to be a greater focus on preparedness for students, faculty, and institutions alike if online modalities are to provide the same level of quality as in-person courses. In addition, a sense of community in the online course environment is invaluable in its ability to help students thrive.

Drawing lessons from the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity for higher education institutions to develop better options moving forward and overcome barriers to successful online modalities. Removing obstacles to accessing online modalities (e.g., through increased internet access in rural areas) can only serve to enhance the student experience and, in turn, promote student retention.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of faculty members teaching asynchronous and/or synchronous online courses at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. This chapter offers an interpretation of the findings, details their practical, theoretical, and methodological implications, outlines the study's limitations and delimitations, and offers some recommendations for future research to continue filling the gap in the literature surrounding faculty perceptions of completely online education and student retention at the community colleges in western Pennsylvania.

Discussion

The results of this study provide a rich view of faculty perceptions of completely online educational experiences as they pertain to student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. It obtained these results by exploring and expanding relevant themes and sub-themes in pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The findings are grounded in the evidence collected throughout the research project.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Three themes and ten sub-themes were developed throughout the course of this research project. Each of the data collection methods of individual interview, focus groups, and document review provided essential data that was coded and developed into these themes and subthemes. The subthemes that emerged combined to develop the each of the respective themes. The first theme identified was preparedness with subthemes lack of student readiness, faculty readiness for online teaching, and student engagement. The second theme that emerged was a community

with subthemes of faculty acting in loco parentis; communication is paramount, faculty vs. administrative input, and data for decision-making. The third theme that developed was lack of access with subthemes impact of COVID-19, ability to pivot, and lack of infrastructure. These thematic findings offer a succinct understanding of faculty perceptions of completely online education and student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. The themes flowed into three primary findings. First, there is a substantial need to ensure that students are prepared for college, generally, and online education in particular, before enrolling in a community college or starting an online college-level course. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in the US in March 2020, had a substantial impact on all levels of education. Third, the barriers that students interested in an online community college education may face must be identified and addressed. Additionally, the themes and subthemes developed worked to provide answers to the central research question as well as each of the three sub-research questions.

Interpretation of Findings

The themes and subthemes established derived from rich data from the three data collection methods of individual interviews, focus groups, and document reviews. The themes and sub-themes during the data-analysis process can be assessed to produce findings that are significant to the success and retention of students enrolled at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. Such findings can facilitate a proper understanding of how to improve student retention in this area. Ultimately, the study found that students need to be better prepared for college-level work, that COVID-19 had a significant impact on student success and retention, and that obstacles that inhibit students from enrolling in and attending school need to be actively addressed.

Preparation is Essential

The data-analysis process made it clear that high school students who plan to take community college courses are generally not as prepared for college courses—especially online college courses—as they need to be. The faculty participants in this study noted multiple ways in which first-time college students are not prepared for college courses. Success in online courses requires a significant degree of self-management; beyond lacking that skill, many students who enter community colleges are simply not equipped to navigate online courses. The level of self-direction needed to master high school courses is vastly different from that required at the community college level, and this dynamic is only exacerbated by the added complexity of online courses (Dahlvig et al., 2020; Hlinka, 2017; Stofer et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2017). The faculty indicated that students are used to rigid schedules and teacher guidance keeping them busy throughout the day. The transition to community college presents students with options for everything from course delivery to what to do between classes. This presents a whole new dynamic to these first-time students; they do not yet understand the changes that must be made to increase their self-direction and pursue a higher level of engagement (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021). These changes require increases in maturity, sacrifice, and self-motivation.

Of course, there are other factors to consider with respect to preparedness beyond the transition from high school to community college, which are particularly pertinent to non-traditional and under-represented students. Through their defining principle of open access, community colleges are the primary avenue to a new life for many citizens served by community colleges. These students frequently have family obligations, no support systems, and no frame of

reference for how to manage a college course; this is especially true for online courses, but such courses are frequently the only option for individuals with multiple competing priorities (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022; Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018; Saqlain, 2021; Tomas et al., 2019).

The faculty at community colleges in western Pennsylvania are aware of the lack of preparation among first-year college students and work tirelessly to structure their courses to make the new experience positive and rewarding regardless. They develop systems to simplify the day-to-day components of online courses and bolster methods of communication, providing as many opportunities as possible for success. Previous research has shown that faculty who devote themselves to educating community college students are heavily invested in their students. They understand that student engagement is a critical driver of student success and persistence (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; Cook-Sather & Hayward, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021). It is the faculty who put a primary focus on students being ready for their courses to encourage them to persist in their academic pursuits. They understand the life-changing potential of higher education, and they want their students to be able to take full advantage of that potential. Identifying ways to better prepare first-year students prior to their arrival at community colleges could constitute a significant contribution to the promotion of student retention.

COVID-19 Impacts and Lessons

There is an abundance of literature on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had across every sector, including education. The pandemic impacted the world of education in countless ways. It impacted enrollment and retention, forced a rapid shift to online modalities, and made a lack of readiness for such a crisis among many students and faculty abundantly clear (Baggley, 2020; Kirchner & Pepper, 2020; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Netanda et al., 2019). In

addition to revealing the lack of knowledge among students regarding ways to be successful in online courses, it brought the light the many technological difficulties that are still holding back online education (Baier & Kunter, 2020; Dolch & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; Sousa, 2021; Thomas & Chukhlomin, 2020; Wood, 2020). During the pandemic-era quarantines, technological equipment (e.g., laptops, routers for wireless connection, and even access to internet) became scarce (Liu et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2021). Knowledge of these concerns provides an opportunity to remedy them in order to alleviate or even prevent similar problems in future crises.

Previous research has demonstrated the need and desire among faculty to be offered ongoing training on the use of technology that aids in online education (Davis et al., 2019; Hegazy et al., 2022; Mishra, 2019). Faculty want to be proficient in online modalities and the technology required to use them so they can best serve their students. With faculty invested in their students, the latter have a better opportunity to maintain engagement and persist in their academic pursuits. The COVID-19 pandemic did not create a lack of resources and training, but it did bring them to light and highlight many opportunities to improve online education moving forward and prevent higher education institutions from being caught off guard in the future.

Barriers

This study identified multiple barriers to student retention in online courses. There is strong evidence that many potential online students at community colleges in western Pennsylvania are at a disadvantage in terms of knowing about, understanding, and attending online courses. Some of the more prevalent barriers are family obligations, lack of technology and infrastructure, and financial challenges. Community colleges are designed to provide open access and opportunities for all citizens eager to receive a higher education (Gonzaleza-Canche,

2022; McKay & Michael, 2021; Odel et al., 2021). Barriers to these opportunities need to be identified and addressed to make potential opportunities in higher education a reality.

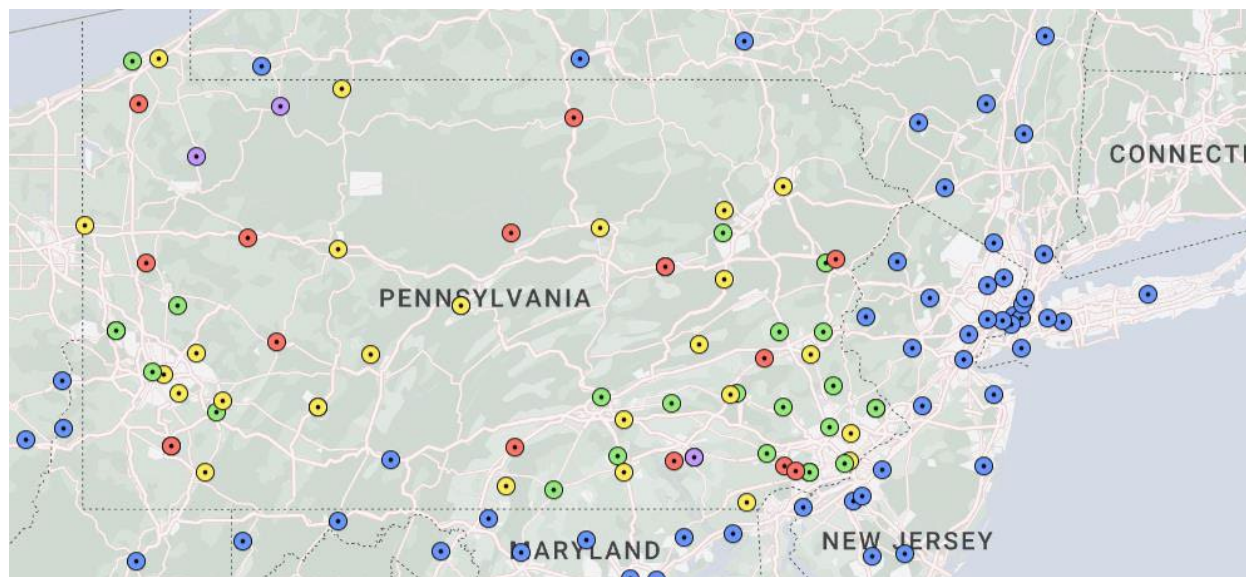
Many people interested in community college, such as first-generation college students, often lack the support and confidence of family members, as they are operating in what is effectively unfamiliar territory. On top of these challenges, at-risk students often have significant family obligations that most traditional students do not. The barriers to enrollment and persistence among such groups of potential students are extensive. Thus, finding ways to inform and prepare these potential students as well as to minimize or remove barriers is critical, as higher education has the ability to change lives and, in turn, the ability to positively impact the communities and regions in which they operate.

Funding is also a clear impediment to student retention. Many non-traditional students, such as first-generation college students, are unaware of the financial resources available to them that could help them to afford and attend college. While schools provide information regarding college opportunities and potential financial aid, many students still walk away from high school without thinking that college represents a real possibility for them (Dahlvig et al., 2020; Hlinka, 2017; Stofer et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2017). Potential community college students frequently lack the financial resources to independently fund their academic pursuits, and they simply do not understand the process of getting financial aid. While community colleges may be the least expensive avenue for many to attend college, the costs are still substantial when potential students are unaware of the funding resources available to them. Figure 2 maps out the higher education institutions in Pennsylvania and the surrounding region alongside information on the

financial resources needed to attend them. This data likely makes those without an understanding of financial aid options view the financial barriers to higher education as insurmountable.

Figure 2

Locations of Public Institutions and Public Two-Year Institutions near PA



(Shaw, K., 2023) (Reproduction permission 2023)

● PA-CC
 ● PASSHE
 ● State-related
 ● Other PA public two-year
 ● Non-PA CC

2021–22 tuition & fees per FTE1 – two-year public

| | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| West Virginia -CC | \$4,330 |
| Maryland -CC | \$4,386 |
| Ohio -CC | \$4,478 |
| New Jersey -CC | \$4,888 |
| Pennsylvania -CC | \$5,446 |
| New York -CC | \$5,661 |
| PASSHE -4-year | \$11,364 |

Implications for Policy and Practice

The research implications for policy and practice are numerous. Community College administrations and political entities must review the policies and practices related to the

attainment of a community college education and make the adjustments necessary to serve the needs of the citizens in areas where community colleges operate. Today, there is a fundamental disconnect from the original intention behind the design of community colleges: to provide open access to those who lack the means to attend four-year institutions (Dahlvig et al., 2020; Hlinka, 2017; Stofer et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2017). Changing the lives of citizens through opportunities in higher education can improve the conditions of families, communities, regions, and beyond. It is critical for policies and procedures at every level to be updated to meet the changing needs of modern citizens.

Implications for Policy

The results of this research indicate that lawmakers in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania would benefit greatly from reviewing and updating relevant policies to provide for increased college awareness and preparedness beginning at the high school level. As students become more aware of and prepared for the next step in their academic journeys, they are opening doors to a better future. Successfully kicking off an academic career is effectively a built-in win for students, and successive wins often lead to student persistence. Knowledge about community college opportunities and ways to navigate the many complexities of higher education demystify the process and add to students' ability to persist in their academic journey (Henninger-Voss & Hertzberg, 2017; Mohammadian et al., 2021; Monaghan & Sommers, 2022; O'Hara & Sparrow, 2019; Saqlain, 2021). By making entry and completion easier, more citizens would be able to take advantage of regional community colleges and change their lives for the better, driving a ripple effect in the state and region.

Implications for Practice

While the need for reform to facilitate meaningful community college experiences is clear, it would also be of benefit to community colleges in western Pennsylvania to review how they address the preparations for and barriers hindering enrollment and persistence in higher education endeavors. Modifications to the manner in which community colleges provide an online experience may provide the necessary stabilization and growth of student retention. Promoting successes among community colleges can only serve to enhance the student experience and increase the level of student retention.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

This section discusses the empirical and theoretical implications of the findings section with a focus on how the uncovered themes align and diverge. It also touches on how this research contributes to the existing literature and the degree to which the results align with the theory outlined in Chapter Two.

Empirical Implications

This study's data-analysis process revealed three themes and ten sub-themes. The three themes—preparedness, community, and lack of access—are discussed below in terms of their alignment with the empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

Ensure that Students are Ready. One of the themes highlighted in this study that is scarce in the existing literature is the lack of preparation in high school for first-year online courses at community colleges. This study's participants consistently indicated that students often start online courses without knowing what to expect, understanding how to self-regulate, or being prepared to thrive in an online setting. This lack of knowledge and preparation frustrates and

demotivates online students. Importantly, the themes developed using participant data indicate that students are not likely to persist if their online experiences are negative. In fact, the participants indicated the opposite: if students do not have even small wins during an online course, they disengage and fail to persist in their academic pursuits.

Engagement is priority number one for student success and retention. The themes generated during this study's data-analysis process constitute a valuable contribution to the empirical literature by supporting the ideology that student engagement is a primary factor in student retention at community colleges. As expressed in the current literature, students who are not actively engaged in the learning process of their online courses are highly unlikely to persist in their educational pursuits (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2022; Hromalik & Koszlka, 2018; Saqlain, 2021; Tomas et al., 2019). To be engaged, a student must be both physically and mentally present. The literature posits that being engaged requires participation, communication, preparation, and interaction among a wealth of other things. The data provided by this study's participants bolsters the notion that engagement is a key element to academic success and persistence.

This study builds on the existing literature through the participants' descriptions of the behaviors and activities of students who are not engaged in their online classrooms. This can be seen in the discussion of prevalent cheating, students in synchronous classes not keeping their cameras on, and the submission of all assignments at the end of the semester. These non-engaged behaviors surely align with existing descriptions of unengaged students in the literature; however, they go a layer or two deeper into the specific factors behind a lack of engagement. Unengaged students are simply not on a path to success; if they cannot be bothered to exhibit a

minimum level of engagement through proper participation, the likelihood of retention is poor. This is supported by both the existing literature and the themes uncovered by this research project, the latter of which provides another layer of data that can be addressed once acknowledged by relevant stakeholders.

COVID-19. There is a substantial body of literature dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact that it has had on higher education institutions, including community colleges. The literature delves into the widespread lack of preparedness for such an event that exacerbated the negative aftermath of the pandemic as well as the impacts that the pandemic had in the field of education, such as a widespread sense of fear, struggles to meet peoples' basic needs, a transition to online course modalities, and the strain on technological infrastructure (Hegazy et al., 2022; Ohnigian et al., 2021; Yung-Tsan et al., 2022). Notably, however, the existing literature was lacking specific assessments of the pandemic's impact on both community colleges and western Pennsylvania. This research project developed three sub-themes that spoke specifically to the concerns of community colleges during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic: impacts of COVID-19, lack of student readiness, and ability to pivot. The participants in this study provided a deeper look into the primary ways in which COVID-19 impacted their online classrooms at community colleges in western Pennsylvania.

Lack of Access. The existing empirical literature has a plethora of data on the lack of access that many citizens have to community colleges despite them having been designed to meet the needs of those very citizens. While the literature extensively covers lack of family support, competing obligations, and transportation issues, among many other factors that hinder access, it does not specifically cover the rural infrastructures in western Pennsylvania, which

results in people being left without reliable internet access. The participants in this study provided a deep picture of the obstacles that they know hinder access to online education at community colleges. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a direct view of the challenges that come with completely online courses, many of which stem from a lack of necessary resources—and this is especially true for places with limited infrastructure like western Pennsylvania.

Despite community colleges having been designed to provide open access to all citizens, limited access continues to be a considerable obstacle for many. Persistence also remains an issue. However, before persistence can be addressed in a meaningful manner, the ability to enroll in the first place must be addressed. Even when students are enrolled in a community college, access often continues to be a problem, as students don't always have the infrastructure or other resources necessary to remain in college (Dahlvig et al., 2020; Hlinka, 2017; Stofer et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2017). This lack of access among the underserved is heightened by a general lack of knowledge about the higher education process, as demonstrated by both the existing literature and this study's findings.

Theoretical Implications

Michael G. Moore's (1997) transactional distance theory formed this study's foundational framework. As explained earlier, transactional distance theory features three main components: structure, communication, and student autonomy. Each component of the theory and, in turn, the themes developed in this study are discussed below in terms of their implications.

Structure. The structure of an online course as described by Moore (1997) and elsewhere in the literature refers not just to the physical format of the online course (e.g., the employed

LMS). It also entails how the responsible faculty member tailors the course to their students' needs and the topic at hand. Additionally, it includes the level of rigidity and flexibility built into the course. The participants in this study all highlighted the amount of effort they put into the structure of their online courses. They reported going to great lengths to provide a more rigid, consistent structure in terms of what and how materials are presented but also offering a certain degree of flexibility to afford students as many opportunities for success as possible. The uncovered theme of community is pertinent here, as it builds on the need expressed by participants to view the online classroom as a community. Doing so bolsters students' feeling of belongingness and, in turn, drives them to engage more with the coursework.

Communication. According to transactional distance theory, communication can be used as a tool to promote student success. Conversely, a lack of communication constitutes a barrier to student success and retention. Communication methods reported by the participants in this study support and expand this element of the theory. In fact, they ultimately formed a sub-theme under the theme of community: communication is paramount, which covers the plethora of methods that the participants have utilized to ensure that students grasp not just course content but also what it takes to successfully manage the online classroom experience. Notably, one element of this sub-theme that is not covered in the literature is the challenges surrounding non-verbal cues. Participants described the challenge of not seeing facial and body expressions during classes, cutting off a whole manner of expressing thoughts and ideas.

Student Autonomy. Student autonomy is the level of self-direction that students possess when it comes to their online courses and academic career. Notably, the uncovered themes are consistent with the literature on the matter of student autonomy. The participants in this study

emphasized the qualities of students with high levels of self-regulation exhibit as well as their relatively high levels of success and engagement. Thus, it is clear from both the literature and the uncovered themes that students must possess at least a minimum level of ownership and responsibility for their education to be successful in online learning.

Limitations and Delimitations

This section delineates this study's limitations and delimitations, both of which are important to understand in order to have a comprehensive picture of the topic at hand.

Limitations

Notably, this research project had a few potential weaknesses that could not be controlled. One potential weakness is that the participants who provided the collected data are humans, and, as humans, they each have their own opinions and personalities that contribute to the participants' shared lived experiences. Another potential weakness of this study is that the COVID-19 pandemic was a very recent historical event, meaning the participants' memory of it may still be influencing their thoughts on the online classroom. While many of the ultimate societal outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic have been positive, the negative circumstances that arose during the event and the rapid online transition may have consciously or unconsciously influenced the data provided by the participants.

Delimitations

When designing this research study, I put a few delimitations in place. Most notably, I limited the study to completely online educational modalities. While student retention is an area across all higher education modalities, I restricted the focus to the online education environment to facilitate greater specificity. I also limited the type of institution and the region of study to

community colleges in western Pennsylvania to facilitate the accumulation of precise results that can fit well into the larger framework of student retention. Faculty participants with a certain level of experience with completely online education were the only ones recruited to participate, as there was a clear shortage of data in the literature on the perspective of faculty members despite them having the most first-hand interactions with students taking online courses.

Recommendations for Future Research

Considering this study's findings, limitations, and delimitations, several recommendations for future research can be made. First, a study could assess the inclusion of short-term wins in online classrooms to determine how much of a difference it makes in student engagement and persistence. Short-term wins come in many forms, such as brief acknowledgments by faculty of a job well done and individual positive notes on assignments—small recognitions that keep the student infused with a sense of accomplishment. Institutions can also add wins through the automatic provision of certifications along the path to a degree, offering some recognition for hard work in order to keep students on the path toward a degree and/or transfer.

More research is needed in the area of artificial intelligence and the role it will play at community colleges. Artificial intelligence is already publicly available, and students are beginning to understand what it can offer. In order to ensure that students continue to build their own knowledge and ethics, research on how to best use and account for artificial intelligence in academia—in the same way one may use tools like Grammarly and Spell Check—would greatly benefit students, institutions, and beyond by teaching people how the technology can be leveraged to better society.

Additionally, research on student retention in completely online teaching and learning environments from the student perspective would bolster the value of this study and the existing literature by providing insight into how students feel they could be the most successful in online modalities. Students are effectively the customers of community colleges, and the factors that motivate them to enroll and persist from their own perspectives would be valuable data.

Finally, more research is needed on just how high schools and community colleges can partner with each other to better prepare students for college-level online learning and self-regulation so that they may start strong, stay strong, and finish strong. A successful transition from high school to postsecondary education would likely build bridges for students that do not exist today in many communities today. Overcoming such obstacles to successful online education would enable many students who need an online modality to enroll and persist in their academic pursuits.

Conclusion

This study focused on faculty perspectives on completely online learning through asynchronous and synchronous modalities and its impact on student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania is the focus of this study. It employed Michael G. Moore's transactional distance theory, featuring the core elements of structure, communication, and student autonomy, to develop its analytical approach. This study was prompted by a significant decline in student retention at community colleges in recent years, which has resulted in these institutions facing a myriad of challenges by the very nature of their operations. Community colleges generally have open admission policies and serve people in their local community who vary significantly in their needs and desires, such as those pertaining to degrees, transfers,

credential requirements, community programs, and more. Despite bearing this burden that four-year universities simply do not face, community colleges are frequently compared to these institutions when considered for performance-based funding, which risks exacerbating existing deficiencies.

The participants who were recruited for this study all have online teaching experience at one of the community colleges in western Pennsylvania. Each participated in individual interviews and focus groups and submitted relevant course documents for review. Coding was conducted on the collected data, leading to the emergence of three themes and 10 sub-themes. The themes were then used to answer the central research questions and its three sub-questions as well as to produce some recommendations for further research. The results of this study indicate that there is a need for students, faculty, and institutions at large to be better prepared for online modalities in order to ensure that community colleges are able to function remotely whenever necessary or even preferable. The study also found that students need to be better prepared for college-level work, that COVID-19 had a significant impact on student success and retention, and that obstacles that inhibit students from enrolling in and attending school need to be actively addressed. Some outliers that came up during the research process pertained to mandatory camera use during online courses and the introduction of artificial intelligence.

The central implication of this study is that community colleges must be capable of facilitating the necessary preparations and addressing significant barriers for students in their academic endeavors. Finally, the study recommended that future research could assess the use of short-term wins, artificial intelligence, and partnerships between high schools and community colleges in online education as well as evaluate the same topic from the perspective of students.

the student perspective of online education and student retention, and the partnerships between high schools and community colleges to better prepare students for community college courses, especially remote courses.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 12, 2023
Sally Mercer
Amy Schechter

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1757 Understanding faculty perception of completely asynchronous and synchronous online education on student retention at community colleges in Western Pennsylvania: A hermeneutic phenomenological study of the faculty online education

Dear Sally Mercer, Amy Schechter,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at

██████████

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP

Administrative Chair

Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Consent

Title of the Project: Understanding Faculty Perception of Completely Asynchronous and Synchronous Education on Student Retention at Community Colleges in Western Pennsylvania: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of the Faculty Completely Online Education

Principal Investigator: Sally A. Mercer, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be part of a research study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be employed in the School of Business, teach at least two online courses, and have taught online for at least three years. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of full-time faculty members teaching asynchronous and/or synchronous virtual courses on student retention at community colleges in western Pennsylvania.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participant in an in-person, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than one hour.
2. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded focus group that will take no more than one hour
3. Provide any documents related to online teaching that are related to your online teaching, such as syllabus, lesson plans, quizzes, etc. This activity should take no more than 30 minutes.
4. I will then analyze and synthesize the data collected from all the individual interviews, focus groups, and documents collected. This will take no more than two weeks.
5. I will provide you with the synthesized data to review for accuracy. This is referred to as member checking. This review should take no more than 30 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect from participating in this study include the identification of potential barriers to student engagement and persistence in the online classroom.

Benefits to society include potentially changing the lives of community citizens with a cascading impact. When individuals within a community persist in their educational careers, it opens the door for career opportunities that lead to socioeconomic gains. These socioeconomic gains funnel into the community, region, and, ultimately, the country. The communities will have citizens with potentially higher wages who pay taxes and contribute to the community's economic stability. This economic impact permeates throughout a state, region, and country.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other focus group members may share what was discussed with people outside the group.
- Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer. Hardcopy data and documents will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. After five years, all electronic data will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer and/or cellphone for five years and then will be deleted. Only the researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the interviews, focus groups, and document collection, participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card. Any participant who chooses to withdraw from the study after beginning but before completing all study procedures will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card. Gift cards will be mailed to participants' campus mailing addresses through the United States Postal Service.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, Community College of Allegheny County, Butler County Community College, or Westmoreland Community College. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Sally A. Mercer. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 443-975-0165 and/or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Amy Schechter, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is [REDACTED], and our email address is [REDACTED].

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix C

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me as if for the first time.

Opening

2. Tell me why you decided to teach at a community college.

Opening

3. Have you always taught online courses?

Opening

4. Describe your experiences with synchronous online education.

CRQ

5. Describe how you structure your synchronous courses.

SQ1

6. Describe the methods of communication utilized in your synchronous courses.

SQ2

7. Describe how you view student autonomy in completely synchronous education.

SQ3

8. Tell me about your perspective on student success in your completely synchronous courses.

CRQ

9. Describe your experiences with asynchronous online education.

CRQ

10. Describe how you structure your asynchronous courses.

SQ1

11. Describe the methods of communication utilized in your asynchronous courses.

SQ2

12. Describe how you view student autonomy in completely asynchronous education.

SQ3

13. Tell me about your perspective on student success in your completely asynchronous courses.

CRQ

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

1. Starting with the person to my right, please introduce yourself to the group as if you are meeting each of them for the first time.

Opening

2. Tell me about what factors you consider when you develop your online courses.

CRQ

3. Do you develop your courses differently for in-person and online courses?

CRQ

4. Tell me about your perspective on what is needed in the structure of an online course to ensure students have the best chance of success in the course.

CRQ

5. Tell me about your perspective on what elements of an online course are needed to ensure student persistence.

CRQ

6. Tell me about how students are successfully prepared for completely online teaching and learning.

SQ2

7. Please describe your point of view regarding completely synchronous and asynchronous education.

CRQ

8. Describe how you believe completely synchronous and asynchronous education impacts today's students' needs and expectations.

SQ1

9. Tell me your ideas of how completely online education can be improved to best meet student needs and expectations.

SQ2

10. Tell me about student retention at your institution.

CRQ

11. Tell me your perception of completely online teaching and learning as it pertains to student retention.

SQ1

12. Tell me how you believe your improvement ideas may also impact student retention.

SQ2

13. Describe any other thoughts, ideas, or perspectives regarding completely asynchronous and synchronous education related to student retention.

CRQ

Appendix E

Individual Interview Transcript Coding Sample

Interview Topic: Understanding Faculty Perceptions of the Impact of Completely Asynchronous and Synchronous Online Education on Student Retention at Community Colleges in Western Pennsylvania

Interviewer: Sally A. Mercer (Sally)

Interviewee: Sarah

Sally: “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. This shouldn't take too terribly long. I'm going to start recording so I can transcribe the interview. My first question is, can you please introduce yourself to me as if we met for the first time?”

Sarah: “Hi, Sally. My name is Sarah [laughter] and I am all about teaching at community colleges in western Pennsylvania. I am a CPA by trade, and I have been since the 80s and I have always wanted to come to teach and in fact when my partner, my accounting firm, when I told him that I was leaving for teaching. he said, ‘God bless you. It's what you've always wanted to do. Have a good life.’ It's always been my heart to work with students, and that's where it comes from. ¹ It is particularly with community colleges that I have my passion. I went to Clemson. I was privileged to go to a four-year school, and when I went to Clemson, there [were] classes that were hard to get into. And so, in the summer when I went home to New York to work, I also took the classes that were hard to get into at Clemson at community colleges. I loved my professors. ¹ So, that is what directed my desire to be in education at [a] community college. It was the goal for me to be at a community college. So that is how it started. I'm also a mom and a

grandmother. I'm also a physician's wife. I live out of state, but it's okay because I teach only online and travel to campus only occasionally. It's okay though because I was used to traveling."

Sally: "Thank you. The second question—you already touched on a little, but maybe you can expand a little more on it—is: Can you tell me why you decided to teach at a community college?"

Sarah: "Yeah, yeah, and to just add to that, I feel, particularly in western Pennsylvania, like there's a real need to just climb out of baseline poverty level income, and so why I teach, **1** particularly in western PA at a community college, is just because I feel like it's the gateway?—The gateway to being able to survive and to make a living wage. Not necessarily, you know [to] become a millionaire or anything, but to be able to provide for yourself and for your family. And so, that is why I feel called to teach at a community college. I've had, you know, great experiences. I've had everything from a single mom who had to drop out of high school to students who failed out of a four-year school, came into the community college system, and had tears in their eyes when they were having success. **2** I asked them to be tutors, and that's what it's all about to me. It is [about having] success, and in a broad community of students that come from various backgrounds. **2** Oh my gosh, my students are so varied, and it just, it is just so awesome! **1** I just love the community college system in America."

Sally: "That really is so awesome. Just doing this particular degree program, I have learned a lot about educational systems and how community colleges came into existence. It was amazing to learn why and how the community colleges were established. Which leads me to a couple follow-up questions for you. The community colleges were established to provide open access. Based on all the information you just provided regarding the varied students you teach and your

passion for the community college purpose, do you feel the original purpose serves you, your institution, and your students from various backgrounds? There is a lot of empirical data that demonstrates community colleges are typically underfunded, and performance is measured similarly, if not exactly [in line with] that of four-year colleges, and, therefore, may not receive as much governmental funding as the four-year counterparts. Can you speak about your experience related to this data?"

Sarah: "You know what? I agree. And I heard a while back, so, like 10 years now, and [I] remember that our funding was going to be tied to graduation rates. ³ We're grouped [with] and compared to four-year colleges and universities. I would say that the purpose of a community college is truly serving the community. There are many different ways that we use a community college that does not result in having a two-year degree. ^{1, 3} And so, to tie any funding to that is not equitable. I get that you have to try to tie [funding to] success, but to define success only as a two-year degree [...] is not fair. ³ For instance, if that was the way things were in New York, where I went, I wouldn't be a success story [...]. You know, I took two classes at my local community college, and it really influenced the trajectory of my life. And yet, I'm not a graduate of the community college, and neither is my daughter. I have her enrolled. I told her we would enroll her in high school and community college. She couldn't go for a two-year degree because of her programs. ³ Her program of choice isn't offered at the community colleges. She enrolled in the community college to get her general education requirements taken care of so when she graduated high school, she went to a four-year college and started her degree program almost half-finished. She was able to take courses she needed, such as English and History, and got those out of her way, and this enabled her to then more directly focus on the courses that she

needed to become a licensed professional in her field upon degree completion. Which she is today.”

Sarah: “I have people coming in for certificates, reevaluating where they’re at in a work environment. **1** Someone said to me that they needed a little background in accounting. I told them that [there] is a degree program or [there is] a certificate. It doesn’t have to be a degree at a community college to equal student success. **1, 2, 4** How do we measure success?”

Sarah: “My mother is not a college graduate, she only took one college course at our community college, and it has given her pride, and it affected her very positively. She was very affected by the achievement, so being a community college student is a very different thing from being a Penn State student. **2** We attract a wide variety of students with different needs. **1** One thing to remember is that when you have open access, you have a situation where not everyone’s on the same capabilities level, such as in reading. **1, 2** They need to level up. You know, they really need to be on the way, but should never give up—never lose focus—[while] truly being interested in doing better. Many of these students need a community, and when you’re in college, you really need that. It can be very influential.” **1**

Sally: “Thank you. [...] Have you always taught online classes?”

Sarah: “No, I have not. Well, taking it way back when my second child was born, I taught. I only had two children, and when they were in preschool, I taught in person. Then, ten years come and go, and then I realized—it began to dawn on me—and I actually didn’t want to jump on it, but it began to dawn on me that we were missing students who couldn’t get to campus. **1, 3** And so, we started a test run of a course that was a higher level, so the students already knew how to study and knew how to work. **2** It was very successful, and we expanded from there with the goal of

having a fully online accounting program. ³ Now, I teach fully online. There are others who teach boots-on-the-ground classes. So, at the college, not all classes in the college have online availability, but for the most part, classes are offered [...] in person [and] remote, which means, you know, I'll meet you anywhere you [are] at any certain time. ^{3, 4} I'll see you every week or online.”

Sarah: “So, I guess one thing, you better think about when enrolling a student for online classes is, ‘Have you [had] experience with online classes?’ ^{1, 3} You hope they have experience online. ² There are a lot of reasons a student may not be able to come to campus to take classes. Then, remember now, there’s a new road in this game with COVID. ^{1, 3} Some students can’t get to campus. There is a gap in what’s available to all students. ^{1, 3} Some students may be able to get to campus one week, but not the next because of work and family, health, or whatever reason. ¹ So, we have [...] all that to think about. I always try to offer remote with the base classes so that students have the opportunity to have the experience. ^{3, 4} Yeah, that way, we always find the way.”

Sally: “Can you describe your experiences with synchronous online education?”

Sarah: “Okay, [...] so synchronous would be my remote class, in my opinion. So, what this synchronous [offering] is, is that I have a set class time. It's usually twice a week for an hour to about an hour and a half two times a week. ^{3, 4} And we have a link where the students log in. I am fully visible, and I start out with them being visible. We all talk just like you would in person. ^{1, 3, 4} Envision me waiting as students come into the classroom in person [...] So, like, [...] ‘How are you today,’ and ‘How's it going?’ Or it could be something like ‘Gosh, it’s snowing.’ You know, whatever opens the conversation. ^{1, 4} Then, then, I actually have the students turn

their cameras off because I start recording, and the one thing about Go to Meeting at the time when I started using it was you couldn't photoshop the students' pictures off. 3, 4 So, then I teach.”

Sarah: “Then, what I do is [...] one day I teach theory, and the next day I teach problem-solving, the application of this theory, and I use a visual. 1, 3, 4 So, I and everything else [have] to be prepared ahead of class, absolutely ahead of time. 3 So, in some ways, it's way more work than being in the classroom. 3 Because everything—like, if you're going to drop in numbers around other numbers, you have you have the template all ready. So, having the class recorded, the students have a recording that they can go back to if it's too fast because that's the danger that you're dropping the numbers and you're not writing along on the white board at a pace that they can follow. 2, 4 So, they can go back and look at the recording. During class, I do stop. I ask things like ‘Does anybody have any questions?’ 4 I talk to online students the same as my in-seat students. 4 I really try and model my remote classes to in-seat. 3 I want to stick to consistency and emulate an in-class, in-person experience; it’s just that we’re all sitting in different places.” 3

Sarah: “So, you know, even the way I review the chapter is consistent with my in-person approach. 3, 4 I start off with the textbook and it might be an e-book for them, and it might be a paper book and e-book for me. I say, okay, we're doing this chapter, and I really just go ahead and go through what is important. I might say ‘watch this table or don’t worry about this one,’ you know. So, I try really hard to emulate what I did in the classroom, and somehow students love it. 4 I've had parents come up at graduation and say ‘your class was my son's favorite class’ too. It’s an interesting challenge. You can also have situations to be careful about because students can check out, even in the in-person class.” 1, 4

Sarah: “What I love is that I get to see the students, uh, but what's hard is I rely on reading faces when I'm teaching and, because I have to turn the cameras off, I can't look at students' faces. 1, 4 But I will say I've had great relationships and developed great rappsorts with students in online [classes], and I really can't do anything if they don't like that environment, you know. I am seeing less of a drive to it, and we do have an in-person ask for the classes that I have remote with as well. 1 So, I'm seeing a dwindling desire for remote. 1 So, then we ask ourselves, ‘Now what?’ for remote classes. Then, but how does synchronous compare to the asynchronous because synchronous classes have everything that my asynchronous [classes] have available to them in addition to having the class. 3 When we take tests, the test is delivered electronically. I don't observe them physically while they're taking their tests and sitting somewhere else. 3, 4 We do have responses locked down on the internet browser, so that's all the same. Is there anything else you could think to ask me about my synchronous classes?”

Sally: “Not for that question, but my next question is: How do you structure your synchronous courses? I know you have touched on elements of the structure, but if you could go into a bit more detail.”

Sarah: “So, like before, it's just like my in-person classes. 3 I start off by asking welcoming questions such as ‘How are you?’ like when people are logging into class, I ask, ‘How are you doing?’ and they become more comfortable. 1, 4 I think asking questions like these provides the foundation of community in the classroom, and all students need community in the classroom to be successful.” 1, 3, 4

Sarah: “I will say, truly, we cannot understate the advantage of them having everything that an online class has available. 3 Now, whether that's good or bad, I don't know because, you know,

when you're in person, there's an inequity that I didn't replicate everything in an online class for my in-person classes. 1, 3 So, they were very tuned into what was due and what was assigned and so now they know they can and are evolving.” 2, 4

Sarah: “I will say, if I compared synchronous to asynchronous, there isn't a lot of difference, but let me compare back to in-person. I will say, I do use PowerPoint more for an in-person class simply so they have a visual while I'm talking, and I think there's PowerPoint fatigue. 1, 3, 4 So, I have to be careful because I know when I was in graduate school, I saw 178 PowerPoints. All I'm doing is counting them, not working with the teacher, so—but I try to be really careful and very pointed about what's important and not wasting their time. 1, 4 Whether they caught on to that, I don't know. I'm not a fan of busy work, so I do think and then I'm rethinking and rethinking how I'm going to do that for my next remote class because I think that is a little element of the team chat. 3, 4 You know, I have Excel docs too, but they don't. So, just again, just to compare [to] my in-person [classes], I had two whiteboards along the whole side of the [room] and one along the whole front. I would often write along the entire board. 3, 4 They say ‘Oh my gosh, look at what time we're in.’ ‘Why would you do that?’ The answer is because, when I did, the students said that was great.” 1, 2, 4

Sally: “Yeah [...] I can see it because you were using all the tools you had to hit on all the different needs of your students. You found ways to texturize your teaching and learning?”

Sarah: “Yeah, and okay, so, speaking of that, I always say, especially in my financial and managerial classes—those are the two base classes I have—every type of learning style hit, and one thing I do worry about is that. 1, 4 For the over-achievers like I am, they might feel they need to use all the resources I present. 2 And, I don't want to say that in the beginning, as you

find what works for you—this is the minimum. This is what you must do. You need to find how you know you learn by listening and watching the videos. 1, 2, 3 If you learn by seeing, and just working through, let me show you how to better use these PowerPoints because you can put them in display mode and then just pass through them and in your head be saying, ‘Oh, I gotta solve this.’ 2, 3, 4 This is what comes; that's checking yourself. But, what I worry [about] so much is that, you know, they might feel overwhelmed, but I would say that's not the biggest problem for my students. 1, 2 One of the biggest problems is they don't give themselves enough time, I would think. They need to set aside enough time for the class and to do the work.” 2

Sally: “So that begins to answer my next question, which is to please describe the methods of communication used in your synchronous courses.”

Sarah: “I'll tell you all kinds of things, okay? Okay, so there are many things that have changed quite a bit, and this is specifically in the last two years. 1, 4 So, we have launched Blackboard Ultra and have many forms of communication available, so I have used the tools in Ultra, I have used e-mail and discussion board. 3, 4 We are, you know, communicating with one another, and mainly the discussion board was for them to communicate with themselves. 2, 4 And it's funny because I have a little run-in with the ed-tech people who evaluate because I don't weigh into this discussion frame. I weigh in on the grading side, where I write to them because I want them to be free to say what they want to say, and I very, very infrequently weigh the discussion itself. I write to them on the side, but that's where I write to them. I communicate using the messaging system now. 4 They find it in Blackboard. Okay, okay, so this is a new development, and I've learned how to use it, and I know some people are still naysayers, but it works. 3, 4 Okay, so, if you think of the ribbon across a blackboard, there is a messaging tool, and so what that does is

you can message all, you can message a specific student, or you can message a batch of students. You can also have students message each other. They can respond to my pages as long as I've enabled it. 3, 4 So, all of a sudden, what I desire for my classes—whether synchronous or asynchronous—is to have a community like I did [...] in the classroom. 1 So, I'm trying to emulate that online [...] but I found for the first time really using messaging [...] that I can [...] allow them to have it available to interact. 3, 4 I'm sorry it's crossed over to asynchronous, but I wrote this is going to be the message stream. In my accounting class, I tell students 'For your final comprehensive tax return, please post questions here,' and so that's a form of communication, and I can use it in synchronous and asynchronous. 3, 4 Then, next thing you know, students are asking questions through the messaging system, and they're actually helping each other. 2, 4 This isn't just communication, but building community, and that's the kind of thing I add in. There are times, like, I see a student working at 11:00 at night, and I'm like, okay, no one's going to answer them, and I just answered them because I don't want them hanging. That's their time to work, right? So, that's a form of communication, and I would use it extensively. 4 I also write on their assignments—if you consider that communication. So, I also have announcements. As an example, I post, 'Welcome. Please navigate over to the week one folder, and let me know if you have any questions,' and so [on]. 3, 4 Again, I imagine you're still talking about synchronous, but that's how I do it for asynchronous classes as well. It's parallel. We're talking about synchronous and asynchronous, and so I've got all [of them] like I communicate constantly with my students. I think I've had 100 communications in the last three days with my students." 4

Sally: “I believe that. I get the ability to message, you know, the person who you're working with and your classmates. Do you feel your students found it really helpful as well?”

Sarah: “I found it really helpful to the students as well. And, and you know what? What went from a very isolated thing of me responding to each student on any given project became very much a community effort, so I—in fact, a student said something that I was going to say. They chime in to inform other students what we’ve already covered or where to find it in a folder. 2, 4 So, so you know [...], it's [...] really good, and what I always say is that it really helps with this communication thing [that] I'm not their competition. The other students are so when this communication is going on in the messaging system, and someone hasn't started the project. 2 See, they're getting it. It also goes to their e-mail. So, they're getting pinged, and it's fine. It's the equivalent of showing up in class and people talking about a project they're working on. 2, 4 I hear things like ‘You haven't started yet?’ Ah yeah, so, for the first time—and again, this is a synchronous class—but I had students turning their project in a week early because they're all helping each other, and I'm helping them. 2, 4 I also weigh in when I'm seeing and hearing this, [...] say, [...] when they are speaking up and challenging each other on how they got to numbers [...] or why someone added something. It's building the communication and community in the class. 3, 4 This may sound a little silly but, you know, when I write pretty informally to them, I am in communication with my students constantly. 3, 4 Sally, some people do not avail themselves like this for students. 1, 3, 4 Another thing I did before the messaging system is, I would send out an e-mail four or five times this semester. I also write them if they drop off the face of the Earth and, you know, I do that kind of stuff. I do check-ins. Does anybody need anything? Do you have any burning questions? Is something bothering you? For a class you

think some students won't ask in class, you let them know it's okay to ask after class. 4 When it's time for a test, I tell them when it is due and send out a reminder. I say, 'Hey, the test is due tonight.' I'll put posts on the discussion board that some of them have not taken any. I hope they don't ignore the signal. In high school, it worked differently, so I'm trying to remind them. 2, 4 It saves me, and it saves them. And sometimes I'm kind of glad I do that for them because some of them don't know what they're supposed to do. 2 It's not because they're not smart. They just don't know what they don't know. You know, they've never been talked to about protocol or what to do in those situations." 1, 2, 3, 4

Sally: "Can you describe how you view student autonomy in completely synchronous education?"

Sarah: "So, again, we're talking remote in my terms, correct?"

Sally: "Yes"

Sarah: "Are we also talking classroom?"

Sally: "Right now, primarily just regarding completely online classes."

Sarah: "It's kind of like—kind of depends. Self-direction, like their ownership of their education in the course. By taking ownership of their education for your class and the classes they're taking online. So, there's some direction in that. 2 The students who are self-motivated outperform everyone else you know by 100%. 2 So, when they take their role as a student as important, and they have a goal—they have a personal goal to get through school—they almost can't be stopped. 1, 2 You know, at their success. Students who are at school not by their desire, they don't tend to really get in there and own it. 2 I have a thing, which might be a little off, but I'm gonna talk about it because I talk about this with my students. It's self-advocating. 1, 2, 4 So, I always say,

you know, ‘No one is gonna advocate for you. Please advocate for yourself.’ Well, some students do take advantage of that. Yes, they do; even in my synchronous classes they do because they always have problems. 4 They always have a reason; they can't get done. So, I like to work with them and be direct, I think. As far as autonomy and self-advocacy [go], I would rather someone take advantage of me, and then the rest of the students who really need it also do it. 2 So, I cast a broader net because it's better than not [catching] the student who's really struggling.” 1, 2, 4

Sally: “What you just said, that when you set up situations in the online classroom where more confident and self-regulating students chime in to help others, seems kind of unique in how you're exposing the students to one another and getting them to help each other and work together. It's part of you building the community you say is needed.”

Sarah: “Yes, yes, and so, do you see? You see highly motivated students, motivating the ones who come in less motivated to be self-directing. 2 You are only asking me about synchronous now, right?”

Sally: “Yes, but I will be asking about asynchronous soon.”

Sarah: “Okay, well—but I would say it overlaps. Now, listen, this is new. This is new. And I'm gonna actually present on it at school because I had such success in my one class; so, it's working in one, it will work in others. 1, 3 What I would say is, again and again, it does get back to self-advocacy and believing in yourself. If someone is speaking up in front of other people, it might encourage other people to speak up as well. 2, 4 You know, so the times when sharing and someone has asked for something, you know, you gotta hold your cards close to you as a teacher because there's no end to extensions and everything that may be asked for. 1, 4 My husband

looked at me after 35 years of marriage and asked, ‘You really do think this much?’ Now, I think how when I went to college, I was doing normal college stuff. My students are going to college, and they're taking their grandmother to chemotherapy, family sitting their siblings, and have parents in some cases that don't understand college; in other cases, they do. ¹ We have students who have parents who are really high achievers, and they don't share that. ^{2, 4} So, we have all these different situations to minister to because it is kind of a ministry. ^{1, 4} It's broad, you know, it's broad, and I know that I know too much in certain situations. Like, I have a non-English student. English is not their first language. I have to take work and respond in a way they understand. ^{1, 2, 4} Anyway, I kind of wandered off of the self-advocacy, but I really do work on that.”

Sally: “Can you tell me about your perspective on student success in your completely synchronous courses?”

Sarah: “Yeah, I wanted to do an analysis—but I just never have time—on the success rate. It's not answering your success question, but I think that the more traditional students are in the remote classes. So, that would mean someone 18 to 22 who's by and large going on to a four-year school are more in-person. Those in that traditional age range seem to do well after some prodding. ^{1, 2, 4} [...] there [are] people who don't belong in an online environment at all, and yet at the other [side of the] spectrum, they're just sailing through. ^{1, 2} They never ask any questions. They're like, ‘This is what I'm ready to do. That's all I have.’ It's just kind of interesting. I think by having the remote classes, we allow students who want a traditional class but can't be at school or choose not to be a chance at education. ¹ We do see some success, yes.”

Sally: “Can you describe your experiences with asynchronous online education?”

Sarah: “Yep. For the first time, I am seeing students never come to campus. 1, 3 Here, I am seeing people who are older sore. 2 Through the classes, I am seeing a way broader spectrum of students in my—I'm just going to call them online, and you can call them asynchronous. 1, 2, 3 For my online classes, I'm seeing people who sign up for online and have no idea what they're getting into, and my battle is that [...] everything I have due is due weekly, and I'm fighting against classes where everything is due at the end of the semester. 1, 2 You won't make it in accounting if you don't work all semester. They can't possibly. So, they are thinking, 'Why do you expect us to get [things] done weekly [when] in English class or whatever, [...] all assignments are due at the end of the semester?' And I'm fighting against that. 1, 2 But, for the students, they don't get that some subjects like accounting build on [themselves] weekly. For the student who isn't prepared for the pace and rigor of accounting to be in an online class, it's a disaster. 2 I do have classes where people just soar. This semester, the average is 92. Yeah, I have a class this semester for the first time, and that happens, and people are already participating. 2 They're not even in the class, and I have written and communicated already. 1, 2, 4 I've written things like, 'The segment is due in the first two weeks' or, 'Hey, I noticed you haven't been in Blackboard.' You know, [...] online success needs [...] me to try to jump in. 4 Do I have a lot of people who are highly successful in the online environment? I do. They are super motivated. 2 It's just an interesting mix. So, my desire is to breed success, [...] to find a way to make unity. 1, 2 I'm still working on it.”

Sally: “Can you please describe your experiences with asynchronous online education?”

Sarah: “I have a lot of experience with asynchronous classes as well. These are harder for students because it is largely on them. 1, 2, 3 Yep, this is more difficult for most students, so I

established color-coded weekly folders and labeled them like Week One, Week Two, etc., and the current folder only opens on that week. 2, 3 It does remain open for the rest of the semester. This way, they don't have to [...] panic that [they] have to dump everything and listen to everything and get everything at one time.”

Sally: “Can you please describe how you structure your asynchronous courses?”

Sarah: “The way I have them structured, I would start off with something like, ‘Welcome to Week One.’ Then, I say what we're trying to accomplish this week. 3, 4 This is what I think is important. I tell them I have information available to help you and that it’s in Blackboard. 4 I tell them if they need other resources to please get in touch with me. Oh, I also make sure to tell them what is coming up, and I do that every week. It's like a template. 3, 4 And then, like, I often say, ‘Hey, watch out. This chapter requires a lot of effort. Please make sure that you're [...] allowing for enough time this week [...] because this one's a little more rigorous.’ 2, 3, 4 All my weekly folders have a content folder where PowerPoints, discussion guides, extra notes, and answers are published. Now, what I found is that, you know, so there's homework to complete, and I include links to secondary software. 3 Some of the students would just download the answer keys, and just fill it in, so I do have an algorithm in there so they can’t just go down and copy over answers. 2 Quite frankly, most of them don't even realize it, so they don't care. In the beginning of the discussion that I gave, I went over the structure and how it works. 3, 4 I’m always sure to add announcements in Blackboard each week, such as, ‘Welcome to Week One. Please navigate over to [the] Week One folder. Here is a link to the introductory video.’ Oftentimes, I make extra videos and pop those in to make sure they understand. 2, 3, 4 Everything is due on Sunday nights for consistency. 3 This way, they know what day all

assignments for the week are due. At the end of a semester, I really review the course evaluations so I can look for specific patterns and make any adjustments to help them learn. 4 I'm also sure to encourage them so they stay engaged. 1, 4 I tell them things such as, 'You'll get it. You'll get the pace—you'll get the pace after a while.' So, it seems that, honestly, the high achievers really like it. 2, 4 Towards the end, so everything opens every week. The last three weeks of the semester, I tend to open everything so that the student has the autonomy to [...] work on the current work and go back to capture anything they may have missed." 2, 3

Sally: "Describe the methods of communication utilized in your asynchronous courses."

Sarah: "It's the same as the synchronous courses. So, by e-mail, and I announce every week there's an announcement. I do the same 'Welcome to Week One' piece. I think it's even more important to help them keep pace, so I monitor and encourage them to communicate with me in any way they can. 4 I don't want them to panic or ever feel like, 'What do we do?' I communicate through messaging all the time, and the student writes to me, 'This link isn't working; can you check it?' 4 If the link was broken, I am sure to communicate to everyone [that] it is fixed. I communicate through discussion boards. I don't necessarily write on the weekly assignments unless I'm seeing a real problem. 3 I'll communicate on every test. I write to them. I remind them how to get in touch with me and make appointments with me. I also check on them. 4 I had one student who just disappeared. I went to look at advising notes and her grades. I'm like, whoa, this is not a student who drops off the face of the earth. Then, I wrote to her. She replied to me that I was the only teacher who noticed she was not around—and I'm online. Think about that. So, I catch people that way. 1, 4 This doesn't really fit into what you're asking me, but I will say, in today's world, I actually know more about my students online than I

did in the in-person class. I've created an environment where they talk to me. 1, 3, 4 One student wrote to me to let me know her sister had a double lung transplant. I know someone was in the hospital. If someone doesn't turn something in and it is out of character for them, I write to them and let them know I noticed they didn't turn it in and make sure everything is alright." 1

Sally: "Please describe how you view student autonomy in completely asynchronous education."

Sarah: "It's usually demonstrated by communication to me. Okay, so, like, this one student who wrote to me on Monday, and I lost her e-mail. I just couldn't find it. I literally had, you know, to find that student who wrote the question to me. It got buried and I couldn't find her. She wrote to me again. So, the online people, they write to me and stay in touch with me. If something is off, they write to me. 4 I've always, in my communication with them, I always say when I'm answering a question, so they can all benefit from it. 4 This doesn't have anything to do with autonomy, but it does help them. I feel like they can self-advocate because I say the answer to the question and ask if there is anything else they are wondering about." 2, 4

Sally: "My final piece is to tell me about your perspective on student success in your completely asynchronous course."

Sarah: "I think a lot of people are having great success. I still think, I mean, I think I beat myself up because I think, 'Oh, this student didn't even take a test or do anything.' I have to remind myself they were in the class as well as everyone else. [...] I think there's an unrealistic expectation sometimes that you're going to have everybody soar. 1 I have like batches and batches of people that are just flying through, and for the first time in their life they're able to access school, and so, I think it's super important [for] a school to offer these classes so that the community's college can reach out to the community. 1, 2, 3 I mean, I have somebody who's, I

mean, I've had a CFO of a company who was in accounting—not [a] CFO, an officer with financial [operations] just moving under him. He soared through my classes. I have four-year students who have full scholarships coming back during summer to take a class or two to transfer back, and they tell me [that] their classes at their four-year college [aren't] like the community college. **1, 3** Sometimes, a community college is all some students can afford. They need these modalities. **1** With access to a community college, the world is open to them through online learning. So, it's been, it's a great opportunity. I do want to make it excellent. **1** So, it's always a challenge to do so with excellence. I mean many different software platforms are out there, and, you know, I try to stay really sharp so I can help them. **2** I think there is just never enough I can do to keep making it better.” **1, 3**

Sally: “That makes sense. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. It has been very helpful. I'm going to stop recording now.”

Sarah: “Okay, thank you! [...] There you go!”

Appendix F

Focus Group Coding Sample

Interview Topic: Understanding Faculty Perceptions of the Impact of Completely Asynchronous and Synchronous Online Education on Student Retention at Community Colleges in Western Pennsylvania

Interviewer: Sally A. Mercer (Sally)

Interviewees: Bill, Doug, Jodi, Sam, and Sarah

Sally: “Welcome everyone. Thank you for coming. I appreciate your time and contribution. I want everyone to know that I am getting ready to begin the recording so I can transcribe our focus group discussion. I want to be sure to transcribe properly.”

Focus Group Participants: Okay [laughter, head nodding]

Sally: “So, my first question for our focus group is actually getting to know each other, and it's starting with the person to my right. That would be Brady. Brady, do you mind going first with introducing yourself to the group?”

Doug: “My name is Doug, and I teach here at the college and at another institution. I've been with the college since 2010. I teach both online and in-person courses.”

Sally: “Thanks, Doug.”

Sarah: “Okay, I'm Sarah, I'm a bean counter. I teach accounting at the college, and I teach as a second career. So, I was in public accounting and, since 2014, I have been happily teaching college courses here.”

Sally: “Thank you, Sarah.”

Bill: “I’m Bill, and I am retiring at the end of this semester. I also teach accounting and other business classes. I’ve been at the college for over 30 years.”

Focus Group Participants: “Congratulations, Bill.”

Jodi: “I’m Jodi. [...] I started teaching accounting at the college [in] ’77, so yeah, 43 years almost to the day. I’m also retiring. I taught accounting, economics, finance, marketing, management, and law. I guess I don’t know what else, but all that stuff and whatever came across. Whatever showed up in front of me. But, yes, mostly economics, finance, and project management. I was only five when I started.”

Sam: “I’m Sam. [...] I started here at the college in IT. I pursued my PhD and then started teaching classes here as well as a four-year college. I mainly teach business classes but also teach esports internationally. I think that’s it.”

Sally: “So, anyone can answer first, and we can build discussion from there. All responses and discussion are welcomed. To begin, tell me about the factors you consider when you develop your online courses.”

Bill: “I can jump on that one. I think the biggest factor that I consider is flexibility. ³ So, beyond the content, which I think we’re finding is pretty much standardized now throughout the accounting classes—the textbooks are all pretty much the same—[...] flexibility for the process of the online class helps students with meeting their personal and educational needs where they are. ^{1, 2} The demands of due dates require some attention too, so those are the two big factors that I can think of to start.”

Sally: “Would anyone else like to add anything?”

Sarah: “I teach almost all online because I live in another state but teach in western Pennsylvania. So almost everything I do is online or remote, and I've been doing it for a while, and I think about how to make community in the classroom. [3](#), [4](#) Even if we're online, it's needed, and I want to find ways to do that. Students need to feel a sense of community to thrive. Online is still evolving and takes a lot of thought.”

Sam: “I found some of the newer tools in Ultra to be really helpful, and I had real success this semester, which made me feel really happy. I often think that, in designing the courses, I need consistency and uniformity in all my courses to help the students not fumble around with finding things and [so they] can focus on learning. [1](#), [3](#) I'm pretty uniform in all my courses, and what I find is that people are attracted to that uniformity. I have to say though, we need to be more creative for online because face-to-face is a lot more fun because everyone is right there. We also need to prepare differently for online. We also have to allow for the fact we don't get all the non-verbal cues online.” [1](#)

Doug: “I think that is a good question for online students because they want to know how to get through their classes. They panic the first three weeks, and then you find the consistency and that leads to them finding their rhythm. I agree [that] community is really important.” [1](#), [2](#)

Jodi: “When I began teaching online, we called it distance learning. For all my classes, I stress my availability, especially in the online classes. [4](#) Availability is critical, I think, to my students. I give them set times for them to check in, and I give them lots of time. We all know tech has glitches, so I don't want them panicking over a glitch. This is a real struggle because, you know, we can't possibly be 24/7. Where does it stop? I've literally written to students at midnight. It becomes a balancing act.”

Bill: “Discussion mode is very difficult online. **1** It takes effort to get them to participate, but it just isn’t the same as if they are in-person facing you. **4** One thing I have been working to do is have some strong students mentor other students who may be having a harder time and [make them] feel more at ease asking a peer.” **2, 3, 4**

Sally: “Do you develop your courses differently for in-person and online courses?”

Bill: “I use the same templates for in-person and online. **3** I use week-by-week folders with instructions and links for the online courses, but they equal the same standards and content as for my in-person classes.” **3**

Jodi: “When I design my online classes, I try to put myself in the students’ shoes. **1** They typically have a lot going on in their lives, and I try to simplify everything for them to make it as easy for them to function as possible. But I would say my overall structure is the same.” **1, 3**

Sam: “It requires a lot of thought to do that, so I do put a lot of thought into the way I do things for online.”

Sally: “Tell me about your perspective on what is needed in the structure of an online course to ensure students have the best chance at success in the course.”

Sarah: “They are structured the same, and the requirements are the same; however, there is a lot more needed on the online side of things. **1, 3, 4** It takes more consistency and lots of organization. I have weekly folders for online, and I do check to make sure they are opening everything, and [I] encourage them a lot, probably more than the in-person students.”

Bill: “The structure absolutely needs consistency and organization, [which] are essential for online students to have a chance of success. **2, 3** I keep folders with instructions and links, as some of us mentioned earlier. It’s imperative to build on the definition of what the standard is for

each week of class. 1, 3, 4 It takes a lot of built-in ways the instructor can see if a student is okay or needs you to provide something more to get or keep them on track.”

Jodi: “I’ve been using Blackboard since ’99, and the most important thing you can do is to play nice with people in IT. Blackboard is the base for the structure of online classes, and IT is frequently needed to ensure students can access and operate that platform easily. 3 I can’t tell you how many times a student of mine has been kicked out of an online exam.” 3

Sally: “Please tell me about your perspective on what elements of an online course are needed to ensure student persistence.”

Bill: “Constant contact is absolutely important. 1, 3 If you have various ways to communicate with them and you pay attention, you should be able to detect if they are falling off, and you can try to steer them back on track.” 2

Jodi: “The accessibility [is needed] to me, especially over the week, two weekends, and the weekend between when they had to test. 3, 4 I would say to them on the weekends, ‘Okay, I’m gonna check three times on Saturday and three times on Sunday,’ just to, you know, to see if anybody got booted out and needed a reset. I would also post an announcement saying to check if you emailed me since blah blah blah. 4 I fixed your resent and so, that way, they wouldn’t wonder. They knew I would communicate and help them no matter the day and time, so they wouldn’t give up.” 1, 2, 4

Sarah: “Yes, I do much of the same as Jodi. I also keep in mind that, often, these students have competing priorities with staying in school. 1, 2 They have a lot going on in their lives. They travel, they have family issues, they work, and other things, and we need to ensure those priorities don’t overtake their school priority, so I find a way to make things work for them, but I

also make sure I'm not doing anything that is unfair to my other students. 1, 2, 4 I really monitor the weekly folders and assignments. If I see a student starting to lag, I reach out to them and let them know I noticed they had not even accessed the current weekly folder." 1, 2, 4

Doug: "Yes, I make sure that my students know my contact information, and they can contact me anytime, and I will respond as quickly as possible. A lot of feedback from the instructor is important to keep them engaged and coming back." 4

Sam: "You know, some students didn't or don't have computers or Internet available at home. 1, 3 These students have to go to libraries or stay here on campus and do their online work. That lack of access and resources is very impactful to students engaging and persisting. 1 These students need extra monitoring in some ways because—what if those outside resources become unavailable? 1, 4 We need to have contingency plans for those students. If they miss just a little of [the] class, it can have [a] tremendous impact on them." 1, 2, 4

Sally: "Please tell me about how students are successfully prepared for completely online teaching and learning."

Bill: "To be honest, students just coming into the college are often barely making it through remedial courses whether they are in-person or online. 1, 2 There is a lack of readiness between taking high school classes and coming to college. 2 They do not understand what they are getting themselves into. 2 It seems to be that, in high school, they are not learning about what college is about—how to succeed in classes in general—and have no idea about the level of self-management they need for college courses, particularly online classes. 2 It's also falling through the cracks at the first advising and registration at the college. 1, 2, 3 Advisors need to have some sort of fact sheet, standards—maybe a minimum GPA—to be registered in an online class. I

don't know, but there is a lack of preparedness, and it is essential that the requirements are explained better upfront. ² These students need to have drive, pay attention to detail, and be very organized coming into an online course, whether it's synchronous or asynchronous."

Sam: "I completely agree. These students are not arriving ready for basic classes and are, in general, not ready for an online experience." ²

Jodi: "Yes, they come in and are thinking they are going to have classes that are similar to the high school classes they had. ^{1, 2, 3} You have to remember, online doesn't fit all people in all circumstances." ^{1, 3}

Sarah: "Yeah, the students say they want in-person classes, but they also want the convenience of online [classes]. One thing I do to help them succeed is to enroll all my students online, even if they are face-to-face students. ^{1, 2, 3, 4} There are so many things that may come up in their lives, so I would always have them added to an online section."

Bill: "Another thing that [I do] to help them prepare and have as a resource for success is, I try to set up, like, a mentor relationship with the other students I know are high-performing. ^{1, 2, 3, 4} Almost like a teacher with skill sets [...] who wants to help other students."

Doug: "I have noticed that, online, it is easier for them to get discouraged, and encouragement is critical for them to keep moving forward. ¹ I keep an extra watch on them, especially if I know they are new online or are obviously struggling. ² I put checkpoints in to help make sure they don't get too far behind and that I provide the resources they need. ³ Many of them come to college and have unidentified learning disabilities or disadvantages, so I need to connect them with the resources available to them. ^{1, 2} The crazy thing is that it all started because I had a student with a learning disability, and he said, 'I can't read the Excel doc and follow the task.'"

Sarah: “It's funny. When I first developed my weekly folder system, I got my course reviewed. I was told that I had too many folders, and it was confusing. Eight years later, it is the model. ³ To me, it is important to remove any additional stress and make the process and structure as understandable as possible. ^{1, 2, 3} Many of the online students may be in crisis or have things going on we don't know about and, to keep them coming back, we need to make it a smooth and organized process, and even more important is the encouragement for things they do correctly and well.” ^{2, 4}

Jodi: “I was earning an MBA when I started teaching, and I put myself in their shoes too. I was experienced at taking classes and juggling life, and I still had panic moments. I can't even imagine those students who don't have a support system, or they are the support system. ^{1, 2} They need the extra encouragement, and I try to make sure I give them kudos and praise.” ⁴

Doug: You know, it seems the administration doesn't always understand the need for different sections of classes to meet the needs of students. ³ There needs to be an appropriate mix of face-to-face, online, and evening [classes]. Pulling proper data will aid in showing what is working and what students need to meet their educational goals.” ^{2, 3}

Bill: “Exactly, there is a real need for the faculty to have other student data as well. We can fine-tune what we are doing in the classroom if we are given adequate data regarding students and what strategies are working. ^{1, 3} This is how we're going to be able to keep them coming back. I get so little data from my institution on my students that I have anonymous surveys I give my students when they leave my class so I can know how to serve them better. ^{1, 3, 4} I make sure it is all completely undetectable, unless they want me to know who submitted a survey. It has helped me to keep my students in my program.”

Jodi: “I agree institutions need to pull the right data, meaningful data for the organization to keep up with student needs and so faculty can also keep tweaking their courses to keep them engaged and coming back. 1, 3 How can we keep them engaged when we don’t know what is clicking for them?”

Sally: “Please describe your point of view regarding completely synchronous and asynchronous education.”

Sarah: “I can jump in on this one. I think our one hundred percent online students, regardless of synchronous or asynchronous are using this modality to seize an opportunity. 1 These students are typically not your usual students, even if they are traditional college-aged students. 1 They have multiple factors in their personal lives that are road bumps or potential distractions from enrolling and persisting in college. 2 The majority of these one hundred percent online students are soaring. 1, 2 They have life situations, but they are using them as motivation, not roadblocks. They want a different life for themselves.”

Sam: “Yeah, we are opening a whole new world to non-traditional students, and we aren’t always meeting their needs to enroll and continue. 1, 2, 3 Just going back to the data needs mentioned before: If we collect useful data, we can do better at serving all students’ needs, but particularly those who would not be attending college if we don’t. 1, 3 We just aren’t offering the non-traditionals the options they need. 3 This is bigger than the community college, though; we need to start this in high school, at least eleventh grade. 2 Students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, [who] don’t have the infrastructure or hard tools for college are out there, and they are smart. 1, 2 These smart kids aren’t aware of what they could have because we aren’t telling them. For goodness sake, most of them would be first-generation students, and we

need to meet their needs. 1, 2, 3 This is an instance where we need to act as a parent for those students and give them the materials to know what they can have and how to get it.” 4

Jodi: “I agree with Sarah and Sam. I believe completely [that] online provides the open doors that community colleges are supposed to provide. 3 Even those students whose families are able to guide them and encourage them [when it comes to] entering a community college, or college in general, need us to think as parents at times because they just don’t know. 3, 4 They are entering a very unfamiliar area, and we need to guide them.”

Sally: “Describe how you believe completely synchronous and asynchronous education impacts today’s students’ needs and expectations.”

Jodi: “Most of them really don’t know what to expect. This is why it is so important to rethink how we are providing college knowledge to them in high school and in advising at the college level. We need to be sure they understand what is required to be successful in college, what is expected in an online course, and how to engage and be successful.” 1, 2, 3, 4

Bill: “I agree, I think it is hard to know what their needs and expectations are because they don’t know themselves. 2 I also agree this is where we need to be sure they understand all their options and we [need to] educate them on college on a deeper level before they get here. Now, having said that, we are seeing more non-traditional students come to class, especially online. So, starting earlier and deeper on educating about college at the high schools, we also need to find ways to educate the non-traditional students who are trying to figure it out. 1, 2 Don’t get me wrong, I don’t think high schools are doing a bad job, I think we all just need to rethink how we are approaching the college topic. 3, 4 So, just think if you are a high school student, and you are working and going to high school because your family needs you to help financially; these

students are going to think there is no way I can afford to go to college. They don't have a clue about things like financial aid or that there are college advisors to guide them. 2 They do need us to take a parental mindset at times to guide them, so they do know what to expect and what is available to them." 1

Sarah: "You know, there are times I am the only person a student knows who checks in on their well-being, not just from a school perspective. 1, 2, 4 Many of them don't have anyone to ensure their basic needs are being met. We are establishing so many resources to aid students' basic needs at our institution, but the completely remote students may not have the ability to come to campus to receive those. 1, 3 You know, like food. Some kids don't have enough food. How can we educate them if they are hungry? It's just an example."

Sally: "Would anyone else like to answer? Okay, so, next, please tell me your ideas of how completely online education can be improved to best meet student needs and expectations."

Bill: "The assessment piece must be changed—improved."

Jodi: "We need to do a better job of stopping cheating for one. 2 I discovered that, when I was giving an online test, students were really getting high scores and their performance in other assignments was lacking. I did a little digging and found out that there are test bank websites and, if you go online, you can start typing a test bank question, and the answer appears for you. 2 So, to combat this, I changed every test question. It took me a lot of time, but I had to do it. Once I did, you wouldn't believe how many failing test scores I found. They aren't learning by cheating."

Doug: "I never thought about that. I'll have to look into that for my courses."

Bill: “I want to go back to making sure they are ready to do an online class before someone enrolls them in one. ² We all know if we get them to engage, they are really likely to be more successful and continue to come back. How are they expected to engage if they are lost and struggling?” ^{1, 2}

Sarah: “Yeah, we really need to evolve to meet the needs of students. On the cheating thing, yeah, I’ve addressed that piece by making sure they know I am watching.”

Jodi: “We need the backing of the administration to evolve and meet the needs and expectations of students. ^{1, 3, 4} Remember, a lot of our students aren’t degree-seeking, so our students’ needs vary a lot!”

Sally: “Tell me about student retention at your institution.”

Sam: “Ours is down, like most higher education schools. Sometimes I don’t think we know the exact numbers we’re down or the real why we’re down, so I’m not sure we know exactly how much we are up or down, but obviously we’re seeing fewer students return. ^{1, 3} Think about COVID—wow! ^{1, 2} That really impacted students from coming back when they had to move to all-online. I think it created a new mindset about how we think about online education and how far off we are not just here, but across the country, with online education and resources to allow students to learn online.” ^{1, 2, 3, 4}

Jodi: “I agree. We’re down, and I don’t think there is one source of why I can put my finger on.”

Doug: “That’s for sure. Since COVID in particular, I have not had as many classes to teach. Now I am only part-time, so full-time get first pick of classes over me, but I am high on the part-time seniority list and still do not have as many classes to teach as usual, and to drop in number during and after COVID—to me there is something there.”

Sally: “Tell me about your perception of completely online teaching and learning and its relevance to student retention.”

Bill: “To me, there is no real data to validate, to show what is happening with different formats. 1, 3 It’s not examined, and there isn’t any real communication with the faculty. 4 So, it’s hard to know what the relevance is right now.”

Sarah: “I feel like I have good discussions with my dean and with my students, but it’s hard for me to know why a student doesn’t come back—but the college has the capabilities to try to find out. 1, 4 We do have an institutional research department that can develop strategies to get that information.”

Sam: “Yeah, I agree. I don’t think the lack of communication is on the dean exactly. I think it is bigger; it’s at the institutional level. I have colleagues at other places who also teach online, and their experience is the same. There is a fundamental lack of communication flowing in all directions at times, so we all don’t necessarily come together to try to tackle these kinds of issues. 4 It needs more cohesion. I also agree it’s not purposeful, we just need to figure out a way to make all this happen so we can start building ways to keep them engaged and coming back.”

1, 2, 3

Jodi: “So, what is that saying? ‘Data is king.’ That kind of captures why it’s hard to figure this out more systematically. We need to know how things like logistics, home environments, problems with teachers, health, work schedules, and not feeling motivated is impacting retention; then, we can maybe get a better understanding of why retention is down and how to fix it.” 1, 2,

3

Doug: “I would agree that we need data—not opinions—to properly answer any kind of [problems with] class and student retention.”

Sally: “Can you tell me how you believe your improvement ideas may also impact student retention?”

Sam: “We need to follow through on meetings and plans collectively. We need that community in community colleges, and if we don’t come together as a community and follow through with meetings and action steps developed at those meetings, we’re going to negatively impact not just retention but enrollment.” 1, 4

Jodi: “We need to find ways to implement our ideas and measure [them]. At the very least, we need to aim to get to a break-even point to start.” 1

Sarah: “If we get students what they expect, to me, that is more likely to bring them back. So, we need to know what they expect and maybe educate them on what to expect. 1, 2, 3, 4 If they know what to expect, they will see they are getting what they paid for. It’s encouraging. We also need to build community in every classroom, online or in-person. We need to set strategies for success by using these ideas to push engagement and ownership of their education. It will build confidence and satisfaction, in my mind.” 1, 3, 4

Sally: “Will you please describe any other thoughts, ideas, or perspectives regarding completely asynchronous and synchronous education related to student retention?”

Sam: “I think we need to build in success, especially for non-traditional or underserved students. We need to establish ways to build in wins for them. If you build in the wins, I’ve seen it build confidence, and the students want to keep getting those wins.” 1, 3, 4

Jodi: “Yeah, I think giving them ways to win is a great idea. I also think we need to find ways to help them think and problem-solve, so they can keep building the tools they need to be successful—not just in school, but in their future.” 2, 4

Bill: “We need strategies to make this easier for them in some ways and more challenging in others.”

Sally: “Could you expand on that a little, Bill?”

Bill: “If we find ways to make the online environment easier to navigate, we can then focus more on the content, and by focusing on content, we can dig deeper into the real learning. 1, 3, 4 Just look at what a mess it was to address COVID at the high school and college levels. 2 We need to take the lessons from a global issue and the impact it had on learning at every level and think how we can make this happen without so many complications.”

Sarah: “To me, again, it’s about building that community in the classroom to get them engaged. Without the engagement, they run the risk of not finishing.” 1, 3, 4

Doug: “For me, I have found I need to make it fun for them. I find that if I make my students feel like they are having fun in the online classroom, they want to come back to have more fun. And most of the time, they don’t even realize they are learning as much as they are, and that is big to me.”

Sally: “Thank you so much, everyone, for your time and contributions. I appreciate all of you and what you do for students. I’m turning our recording off now.”

Appendix G

Sample Syllabus Coding

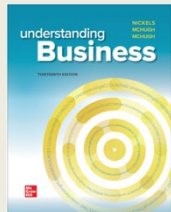
Introduction to Business
BUS-101-95 | Course Syllabus
8-Week | Fall 2023

| | | | |
|--------------------------|--|------------------------|--|
| Class Section(s): | BUS-101-95 8-Week | Class Location: | |
| Class Time(s): | Online (Blackboard) - 100% Fall, 2023 - (8/21/2023–10/16/2023) Final Exam: 10/16 Final Grades Available: 10/18/2023 | | |

3, 4

| | | | |
|--|--|------------------|-----------|
| Instructor: | | Semester: | Fall 2023 |
| Instructor Office Hours and Location: | On Mondays, I can be found at the Please stop by anytime, and we can meet. Telephone or Zoom appointments are also appropriate, as is e-mail. E-mail is the fastest option most of the time. | | |
| Instructor Contact Methods: | Generally, it is best to email me with your questions: Per college policy, you MUST email me from your school email address. Personal email addresses, like those from Gmail, Hotmail, Yahoo, etc., could be flagged as spam and not responded to. You can also reach me through my office phone: <i>Most importantly, if you have questions, ASK! If you do not ask, I cannot help. My goal is for you to succeed in this course, as I am sure it is also yours. But we cannot achieve that if questions or concerns go unresolved.</i> | | |

2, 3, 4

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|---|---|---|
| Course Textbook/Other Materials: |  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Understanding Business (13th ed.)</i>, Authors: Nickels, W.G., McHugh, J.M., & McHugh, S.M. (Loose Leaf w/ Digital Access Code). 2. Boston Market Case Study and Stock Market Adventure Course Project (both provided by the instructor) 3. Weekly lecture PowerPoints and/or supplemental videos on Blackboard LMS 4. Additional readings or videos/texts provided by the instructor |
|---|---|---|

2,3, 4

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|------|
| Course Credits | 3 Credits, no prerequisites, no co-requisites | |
| Course Description: | Description - Business 101 Introduction to Business This course provides a foundation in modern business and business practices, including management principles, marketing, and human resource management. The operation of business in a free enterprise system, the government's role in business, and forms of business ownership are discussed. | 3, 4 |

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Learning Outcomes: | <p>Learning Outcomes 1,</p> <p>2, 3, 4</p> <p>Upon completion of the course, the student will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify the fundamentals of business organizations, their function, role, and impact on the economy. 2. Explain the importance of ethical standards and social responsibility in the business environment. 3. Discuss the role of the Federal Reserve, monetary and fiscal policy in the management of the economy. 4. Describe the opportunities and barriers to international business and the strategies for participating in a global economy. 5. Compare the major forms of business ownership. 6. Describe the function of human resource management in an organization. 7. Differentiate between the various marketing strategies. <p>Listed Topics</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Business and its role in a global society 2. Economics 3. International business 4. External business environments 5. Business ethics and social responsibility 6. Forms of business ownership 7. Principles of management 8. Human resource functions 9. Principles of marketing 10. Accounting: financial statement basics 11. The public market 12. Diversity |
|---------------------------|---|

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| General Education Goals: | How this course meets the General Education Goal(s)? |
| | <p><i>Students who successfully complete this course acquire general knowledge, skills, and abilities that align with CCAC's definition of an educated person. Specifically, this course fulfills these General Education Goals:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical Thinking & Problem Solving • Culture Society & Citizenship <p style="text-align: right;">1, 2, 3, 4</p> |

Course Policies & Procedures

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Evaluation Plan: | <p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Course Modules 1, 2, 3, 4</p> <p>This course will utilize weekly lectures AND online coursework.</p> |
|-------------------------|---|

| <p>Evaluation Plan (cont.):</p> | <p>The weekly module opens on Monday morning, and work is due the following Sunday by 11:59 PM EST. Each module holds instructions for the week, weekly assessments, additional lectures, assignments, projects, and other relevant material.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Teaching Methods and Evaluation Plan</p> <p>Course requirements and point values are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly Chapter Assignments: (19 @ 15 pts ea.) 285 pts. (McGraw-Hill Connect through Blackboard) • Weekly Chapter Assessments (quizzes): (20 @ 10 pts ea.) 200 pts. (McGraw-Hill Connect through Blackboard) • Attendance & Participation: 50 pts. (including Current Events in Business Weekly Discussion) • Syllabus Quiz: 10 pts. (on Blackboard) • Weekly Discussion Board (8 @ 5 pts.) 40 pts. (on Blackboard) • Boston Market Case: 125 pts. (on Blackboard) • Stock Market Adventure: 140 pts. (submit on Blackboard) • Final Exam: 150 pts. (submit on Blackboard) <p style="text-align: center;">Course Point Total = 1000</p> <table border="1" style="margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto;"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="3" style="text-align: center;">Course Grading</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">A</td> <td style="text-align: center;">90-100%</td> <td>Aim here. Be inspired, goal-driven, and achievement-oriented!</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">B</td> <td style="text-align: center;">80-89%</td> <td>Admirable, but with just a bit more effort, you could be one level higher...</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">C</td> <td style="text-align: center;">70-79%</td> <td>Average - but who wants to be seen as just average?</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">D</td> <td style="text-align: center;">60-69%</td> <td>You and I both know this level is not indicative of your best efforts...</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">F</td> <td style="text-align: center;"><60%</td> <td>...say no more.</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>All assignments, quizzes, etc., will be submitted online, except the Final Exam. The <i>Stock Market Adventure</i> can be submitted via Blackboard. Weekly quizzes will have time limits, but rest assured, you will have plenty of time to complete them.</p> <p><i>Fair game for the Final Exam is <u>anything</u> discussed in the course. I urge you to take robust notes!</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Other notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Boston Market Case Study will be introduced in Week 2 and is due Week 4. • The Stock Market Adventure Course Project will be introduced in Week 1 and is due Week 8. • The Final Exam <u>is</u> comprehensive and taken on 10/16. | Course Grading | | | A | 90-100% | Aim here. Be inspired, goal-driven, and achievement-oriented! | B | 80-89% | Admirable, but with just a bit more effort, you could be one level higher... | C | 70-79% | Average - but who wants to be seen as just average? | D | 60-69% | You and I both know this level is not indicative of your best efforts... | F | <60% | ...say no more. |
|--|--|--|--|--|----------|----------------|---|----------|---------------|--|----------|---------------|---|----------|---------------|--|----------|----------------|-----------------|
| | Course Grading | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| A | 90-100% | Aim here. Be inspired, goal-driven, and achievement-oriented! | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| B | 80-89% | Admirable, but with just a bit more effort, you could be one level higher... | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| C | 70-79% | Average - but who wants to be seen as just average? | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| D | 60-69% | You and I both know this level is not indicative of your best efforts... | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| F | <60% | ...say no more. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <p>Attendance:</p> | <p>The weekly module opens on Monday morning, and work is due the following Sunday by 11:59 PM EST.</p> <p>Nota bene: Attendance and participation are worth 50 points in this course. It is expected that students will watch <u>course lectures on time, every time.</u></p> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

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| | <p>This modality (8-week) is of tremendous benefit to students with busy schedules, unpredictable work situations, and/or familial obligations. It is expected that students will plan accordingly to review the readings, view lectures, and complete assessments or assignments. It is further advised that students develop a contingency plan should their original study and work completion plans fail. Large extensions on assignments, tests, quizzes, etc. are unlikely to be granted.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1, 2, 3, 4</p> |
| <p>Test and/or Quiz Makeup:</p> | <p>All assignments are due each Sunday evening by 11:59 PM EST unless otherwise noted. A 10% per day deduction for late work has been approved for the McGraw-Hill Connect assignments. Other assignments may be manually adjusted if turned in late.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">3, 4</p> |
| <p>Technology Use:</p> | <p>Much of this course will rely on your ability to use and navigate the Blackboard LMS. The <i>Boston Market Case</i> assignment should be submitted in Microsoft Word format, and the project will be submitted using a combination of Microsoft Word and Excel. Students should ensure that they have access to the required technology to successfully complete this course. If they do not, they should immediately contact the instructor who can assist in finding the required resources. I am more than happy to help you succeed in any way that I can - just ask!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">2, 3, 4</p> |
| <p>Academic Integrity:</p> <p>Academic Integrity (cont.):</p> | <p>is deeply committed to academic honesty and integrity. Cheating, plagiarism, ethical misconduct, or any other form of inappropriate behavior, may result in the immediate failure of a course, and potentially the removal of the student from the college.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Remember, honesty is doing the right thing. Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is looking...</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">1, 2, 3</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Highlights from the Student Code of Conduct</p> <p>The college expects students will <u>not</u> engage in:</p> <p>Cheating</p> <p>The act or attempted act of deception by which a student misrepresents that he/she has mastered information on an academic exercise that, in fact, has not been mastered.</p> <p>Fabrication</p> <p>The use of invented information or citation in an academic exercise or the falsification of research or other findings.</p> <p>Plagiarism</p> <p>Occurs when a student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fails to place quotation marks around material copied word-for-word from another source, published or not, including web-based content (long quotes are indented and blocked, according to discipline documentation requirements) • neglects to attribute words and/or ideas to their author, whether the author is published or not • closely follows the original's wording and sentence structure when attempting to paraphrase, and/or |

| | |
|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presents all or part of a paper from an essay-purchasing website or other source as his or her own work. <p>Ethical Misconduct</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowingly violating a standard of ethical conduct incorporated into a specialized program of study. <p>Academic Dishonesty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing or altering a grade or obtaining and/or distributing any part of a test that is to be administered, or inappropriate collaboration or other violation of the terms of an academic assignment as defined by the instructor and/or syllabus. <p>Given the serious nature of academic honesty, it is highly recommended that you review the link below for a detailed overview of proper academic conduct.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Student Code of Academic Conduct</p> |
| <p>Other Policies and Procedures:</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Suggestions for Academic Progress¹ 1, 2, 3, 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This is a college-level course at an outstanding community institution, and you are a college student undertaking serious academic study with meaningful career and life consequences when you finish. My expectations for you are high, and my primary goal is to give you your “money’s worth” in this class - even if you do not want it. ▪ I encourage you to ask questions or request explanations. Do not be afraid to disagree with me or your fellow classmates, either. But do so respectfully and professionally. Remember, I am far from perfect and not all-knowing, but I am here to guide you on your journey. ▪ Do not wait until the last minute to study or to do your assignments; you are only cheating yourself. If you choose to procrastinate, you probably will not like the outcome. ▪ Be honest with yourself and do not make shallow excuses - not only in this class, but in life too. Take responsibility for your actions; after all, they are yours. With that said, things do happen and sometimes life gets in the way. Communicate with me! ▪ Come to every class and be an active learner by participating. We can all learn from each other’s wisdom! ▪ Get to know other students in this class. <u>Form study groups.</u> This might be the best hint of them all. ▪ If it is in the book and/or we have talked about it (e.g., lecture), you will likely see |

¹ These suggestions originally created by Dr. Edward Villella at Kent State University, and personally mangled by me.

| | |
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| <p>Other Policies and Procedures (cont.):</p> | <p>it again when it counts. In other words, read the book thoroughly and often. Attend class diligently and review the lectures - preferably more than once to solidify the material!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Take advantage of the colleges' excellent student services, (i.e., library, developmental courses, computer labs, etc.). All these services are intended to help you succeed academically and socially. ▪ Follow directions carefully and read the syllabus, instructions, and other documents provided carefully. When not sure, ask. Emailing me is a perfect way to inquire about matters you are uncertain about. <u>You can always call me if you need to at: .</u> ▪ Hard work does not guarantee high grades, but it sure does help! ▪ All written assignments should be completed using APA 7th Edition. To help guide you I have created a PowerPoint deck with embedded videos to explain the requirements. You can find it under the <i>Start Here</i> tab in Blackboard. It works best if you "Play from Beginning". ▪ Do what it takes to get the job done! It is only an 8-week semester. Before you know it, it will have ended. The choice of how well you want to do in this course is yours... <div data-bbox="699 1045 1198 1255" style="text-align: center;"> </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stay informed by reading texts and listening to podcasts of "substance," and watching "informed" television. <i>To assist in this endeavor, I have labored endlessly to provide a 10-page document with numerous educational, entertaining, and relevant movies, podcasts, television shows, and books.</i> I guarantee that you will love something on the list! It will help you "bring to life" the business topics we talk about in this course. |
|--|--|

All students are expected to read and comply with the policies and regulations outlined in the Student Handbook, including without limitation the College's policies regarding academic and behavioral conduct, the procedures for requesting an accommodation based upon a disability, pregnancy, or pregnancy-related condition, or religious observance, and for reporting unlawful discrimination and harassment. 1, 3, 4

The Student Handbook is available to view and download from the College's website at the following URL:

The full text of the College's *Policy Manual*, *Administrative Regulations Manual*, and Civil Rights Complaint Procedure can also be viewed and downloaded at:

Information concerning the process and documentation required to request a disability-related accommodation can be obtained by contacting the campus' Office of Supportive Services for Students with Disabilities (OSSSD) or by visiting the OSSSD information page at:

Students are reminded that they can access their course information and school email account, the Academic Calendar (including add/drop/withdrawal deadlines), the Student Handbook, the College's Incident Report form, and many other College services through the My portal at:

Pro Tip - Print the prior three pages and tape them to your wall next to your desk (or wherever you do your work). That way, you always know what needs to be done. Cross off items as you get them completed. If you stick to this, you'll never fall behind. I have done it for years, and it works!

1, 2, 4

Course Outline Corrections: During the semester/session, reasonable changes to the course outline may be academically appropriate. Students will be notified of these adjustments by the instructor in a timely manner. 2, 3

(This document was last revised 8/15/2023).

Appendix H**Sample Test Document**

BUS-101-95 Final Exam - Student name: _____

1, 2, 3, 4

Questions:

1, 2, 3, 4

- 1) Which characteristic helps explain the popularity of infomercials?
1) _____
- A) impact of favorable government testimonials on potential buyers
 - B) ability to clearly demonstrate the product's benefits
 - C) interactive nature of the presentation
 - D) use of an inexperienced salesperson who is believable
- 2) We describe charitable donations by corporations to nonprofit organizations as
2) _____
- A) corporate philanthropy.
 - B) structural commitment.
 - C) corporate strategy.
 - D) corporate responsibility.
- 3) Marketing costs make up less than 25 percent of the total cost of the goods consumers buy.
3) _____
- true
 - false
- 4) Businesses use demographic studies to understand where people live, their lifestyles, and what they are likely to buy.
4) _____
- true
 - false
- 5) War and terrorism in many parts of the world often lead to
5) _____
- A) a decrease in warring nations.
 - B) consumer and economic hardship due to increased military spending.
 - C) an increase in prosperity and peace throughout the world.
 - D) consumers spending more because they feel more patriotic.

- 6) In recent years, the U.S. manufacturing sector has experienced _____ productivity. 6) _____
- A) relatively stable
 - B) rapidly declining
 - C) declining
 - D) rising
- 7) Given that measuring a firm's financial health is important to its survival, which strategy is good advice for a person just starting a business? 7) _____
- A) Select an accounting system that helps you make decisions, and helps you report information to others outside your firm.
 - B) Accounting systems used by big business are not suitable for small businesses.
 - C) Create a method for keeping your books that makes sense to you. Outside agencies such as creditors and suppliers will not evaluate you by the way you keep books.
 - D) All transactions are important. Separating transactions only serves to create a perception that some transactions are of lesser importance than others.
- 8) Which would be classified as an institutional investor? 8) _____
- A) commodity brokers
 - B) pension funds
 - C) the Federal Reserve
 - D) stock exchanges
- 9) For most service businesses the quality standard has become 9) _____
- A) providing prompt and predictable service.
 - B) providing a competitive level of service at the lowest cost.
 - C) pleasing customers by anticipating their needs.
 - D) less important than it is for manufacturing businesses.

10) Eddie operates an antiques shop as a sole proprietorship. However, he is in poor health and may be unable to continue running the business. If Eddie becomes incapacitated, his business

10) _____

- A) automatically converts into a public corporation with stock sold to interested investors.
- B) automatically continues under new management as a sole proprietorship.
- C) becomes the property of the most senior employee who wishes to continue operating the firm.
- D) ceases to exist unless sold or taken over by Eddie's heirs.

11) What is an important aspect of operations management?

11) _____

- A) determining the best means of financing the firm's operations
- B) deciding whether to pay a dividend to the firm's stockholders
- C) developing the best advertising strategy to promote a firm's products
- D) choosing the best location for a firm's facilities

12) One of the things that labor is interested in is fairness.

12) _____

- true
- false

13) A good business plan will

13) _____

- A) describe all aspects of the business, including product, the target market, the nature of the competition, any financial resources, and the owner's qualifications.
- B) focus on the nature of the business and the target market, omitting personal information about the owner in order to avoid personality issues.
- C) be purposefully vague as specifics can restrict creativity and flexibility.
- D) focus on the big picture and omit the small details of operating the business.

14) Which product would most likely be classified as a specialty good or service?

14) _____

- A) a car insurance policy
- B) running shoes
- C) a first edition copy of *Moby Dick*
- D) a refrigerator

- 15) Supervisory managers usually work more with ideas than with people. 15) _____
- true
 - false
- 16) Which activity is most likely to be performed by a financial manager? 16) _____
- A) identification of specific target markets for a firm's goods
 - B) design of a marketable product that satisfies an unmet need
 - C) preparation of the balance sheet and income statement for the firm
 - D) analysis of the tax implications of various managerial decisions
- 17) According to Maslow, if you have a self-esteem problem, you probably will not be able to concern yourself with developing to your fullest potential. 17) _____
- true
 - false
- 18) Consumer decisions regarding the products they buy are often influenced by their nationality, religion, or ethnic origin. Marketers realize that the consumer decision-making process is impacted by the consumers' 18) _____
- A) four Ps.
 - B) Subcultures.
 - C) market position.
 - D) cognitive behaviors.
- 19) In most industries, the only producers that pose a serious threat to U.S. manufacturers are those in Japan and Western Europe. 19) _____
- true
 - false

20) In just a few short weeks, Stefan will arrive back in the states after a semester abroad. He is already in a temp agency's database from the previous summer, when he spent 8 weeks working for an accounting firm. Stefan will again try to hire on as a(n) _____ during the summer months. The company that hired him last summer typically hires several college students each year since the company does not need to offer college students benefits.

20) _____

- A) intermediate worker
- B) primary worker
- C) apprentice
- D) contingent worker

21) When an investor purchases a security, the investor does so with the expectation of

21) _____

- A) minimizing risk.
- B) providing commissions.
- C) making a profit.
- D) maintaining his or her capital position.

22) A flat organization is less likely to respond quickly to customer needs.

22) _____

- true
- false

23) Herzberg's research identified the key factors that motivate workers, including company policies and administration, wage rates, interpersonal relations with co-workers, and physical environment at work.

23) _____

- true
- false

24) The same proven management styles used by companies in their domestic operations should automatically be employed in their foreign subsidiaries.

24) _____

- true
- false

25) Manufacturing firms in the United States have consistently been laying off workers. Based on what you have learned, the best explanation of this trend is that

25) _____

- A) firms have been trying to weaken unions by reducing their reliance on labor.
- B) workers in the United States have become less productive and cannot compete in the global economy.
- C) the economy has been in a prolonged depression that has lasted more than a decade.
- D) firms in many industries have become so efficient that they need fewer workers.

26) The Federal Reserve Bank operates

26) _____

- A) as a semiprivate organization not under the direct control of the government.
- B) under the direction of the Banking Oversight Committee of Congress.
- C) under the direct control of the executive branch of the government.
- D) as a special agency of the U.S. Treasury.

27) Entrepreneurs looking for a business that gives them the best opportunity to get rich should consider starting a business in

27) _____

- A) the food service industry.
- B) the agriculture sector.
- C) the manufacturing sector.
- D) a low-risk industry.

28) Public relations has more power to influence consumers than other forms of corporate communication because

28) _____

- A) the message comes via the media, which consumers consider trustworthy.
- B) it is an unpaid form of communication.
- C) there are no government regulations concerning public relations activities.
- D) only reputable firms use public relations to communicate with customers.

29) A(n) _____ is an arrangement whereby someone with a proven idea for a business sells the rights to use the business model, to sell a product or service to others in a given territory.

29) _____

- A) extended ownership agreement
- B) franchise agreement
- C) conditional grant
- D) trade contract

30) When Mandy graduated with a degree in computer science, she started her software company. On her first day of operations, she posted a sign that read, "This company will always operate within the legal limits of the law." Posted where all employees could clearly see it each day, this demonstrated

30) _____

- A) her commitment to the Golden Rule.
- B) her expectation that all employees follow the laws that apply to the business.
- C) her aversion to immorality.
- D) her commitment to high ethical standards of behavior.

31) Which factor is consistent with the growth stage of the product life cycle?

31) _____

- A) high profit levels
- B) a stable number of competitors
- C) a peak in the sales curve
- D) declining profits

32) What is an advantage of hiring contingent workers?

32) _____

- A) It is good strategy if the economic climate is uncertain.
- B) When a company's work is very stable and steady, it is best to use contingent workers.
- C) They are more dependable because they are mature employees.
- D) When the tasks are very narrow in scope and specialized, it is best to use contingent workers.

- 33) Entrepreneurs applying for a bank loan should realize that bankers will
33) _____
- A) expect to receive a share of ownership in the business in exchange for their loan.
 - B) generally make loans only to small businesses in high tech industries.
 - C) offer only short-term financing.
 - D) expect the entrepreneur to provide a business plan.
- 34) Firms are considered multinationals when they
34) _____
- A) sell any of their products outside their home country.
 - B) have a physical presence or manufacturing capacity in multiple countries.
 - C) export 100 percent of their products.
 - D) positively affect the U.S. balance of trade.
- 35) Brokers are marketing intermediaries that create the goods they distribute.
35) _____
- true
 - false
- 36) _____ earnings per share measures the amount of profit a firm earns per share of outstanding common stock when preferred stock, stock options, warrants, and convertible debt securities are also taken into account.
36) _____
- A) Diluted
 - B) Broad-based
 - C) Basic
 - D) Restricted
- 37) In a just-in-time inventory system, suppliers
37) _____
- A) enjoy much lower delivery costs.
 - B) are usually connected electronically so they know what will be needed and when.
 - C) have a great deal of flexibility in determining when to make deliveries.
 - D) deliver materials and parts in large quantities only a few times a year.

38) Adesh has agreed to invest \$19,000 in a partnership with his brother and sister-in-law. Not being in the same line of work as them, Adesh does not intend to actively work in the partnership. He also does not want to risk any of his own assets other than the \$19,000 investment. The partnership has agreed to permit him to share in the profits. As an expert on forms of business ownership, you know that Adesh is a _____ in this partnership.

38) _____

- A) secondary partner
- B) preferred stockholder
- C) general partner
- D) limited partner

39) Which statement is accurate about capitalism?

39) _____

- A) Most means of production and distribution are privately owned and operated for profit.
- B) Markets operate to carry out the decisions made by central planners.
- C) Utilities, health care, education, and other important services are operated by the government.
- D) The primary function of the government is to distribute wealth more evenly.

40) The president of the United States is in control of the U.S. money supply.

40) _____

- true
- false

41) Small businesses lack the resources to compete directly with big businesses.

41) _____

- true
- false

42) Which tactic would management be most likely to use during a labor-management dispute?

42) _____

- A) lockouts
- B) picketing
- C) secondary boycotts
- D) primary boycotts

43) One difference between managers and leaders is that

43) _____

- A) all employees can manage, but only top managers can lead.
- B) managers are found in businesses while leaders operate in nonprofit organizations.
- C) managers use an autocratic approach while leaders embrace a democratic style.
- D) managers work to achieve stability while leaders embrace change.

44) The strength of the U.S. dollar relative to other currencies depends mainly on

44) _____

- A) the performance of the U.S. economy relative to other economies.
- B) exchange rate decisions made by the International Monetary Fund.
- C) how much gold backs the money supply.
- D) the rate of inflation in the United States.

45) Firms that adopt a relationship marketing strategy attempt to

45) _____

- A) develop their promotional efforts utilizing mass media such as television, newspapers, and radio in order to relate to a large audience.
- B) maximize market share by controlling production costs and maintaining low prices.
- C) develop products that meet the specific requirements of individual customers.
- D) maximize their market share by designing products that appeal to large numbers of customers.

46) An accurate statement regarding this chapter is: "Business law establishes ethical behavior."

46) _____

- true
- false

47) If you are trying to prevent failure, it is a good idea to go into the business with good record-keeping techniques.

47) _____

- true
- false

- 48) As firms make greater use of empowerment and teams, managers will find that they
48) _____
- A) must become more like coaches and counselors than bosses.
 - B) will need to provide the teams with detailed instructions to give them a clear sense of direction.
 - C) should use the same techniques for directing employees that were used in the past.
 - D) will need to closely supervise the teams to make sure they remain focused on the goals of the organization.
- 49) The financial failure of a firm is often due to
49) _____
- A) tight control of expenses.
 - B) undercapitalization.
 - C) overcapitalization.
 - D) precise management of cash flows.
- 50) If public employees and their union representatives were prohibited by a vote in the state senate from negotiating with government officials on issues that affected their labor contracts, which rights would be directly affected?
50) _____
- A) decertification
 - B) yellow-dog contracting
 - C) collective bargaining
 - D) process negotiation
- 51) **Bonus** - What is an advantage of a matrix organization structure?
51) _____
- A) The project teams are permanent.
 - B) It is much cheaper to staff than other organization models.
 - C) It provides for efficient use of organizational resources.
 - D) It is a complex organization structure.
- 52) **Bonus** - The sense of satisfaction you get when you achieve an important goal is an intrinsic reward.
52) _____
- true
 - false

Answer Key

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1) B

Infomercials use product demonstrations that clearly show the product's benefits.

2) A

3) FALSE

4) TRUE

5) B

War and terrorism will cause hardships for consumers and the economy due to the movement of government funds from social programs and issues to military spending.

6) D

7) A

It is almost impossible to effectively run a business without utilizing an accounting system to record, classify, and summarize financial events and transactions. We use our accounting systems to help make well-informed decisions, as well as to report financial information about the firm to interested stakeholders.

8) B

Institutional investors are large investors such as pension funds, mutual funds, and insurance companies.

9) C

Pleasing customers by anticipating their needs has become the quality standard for most service businesses.

10) D

A sole proprietorship ceases to exist if the proprietor dies, retires, or becomes incapacitated, unless it is sold or taken over by the owner's heirs.

11) D

Operations management includes such responsibilities as facilities location, facilities layout, and quality control.

12) TRUE

13) A

A business plan is a detailed written statement that describes the nature of the business, the target market, the advantages the business will have relative to competitors, and the resources and qualifications of the owner.

14) C

Specialty goods and services are products that have a special attraction to consumers who are willing to go out of their way to obtain them. Consumers who want a first edition copy of a book would be likely to make a special effort to find it. The rest are all shopping goods.

15) FALSE

16) D

Tax management often is an important part of a financial manager's job.

17) TRUE

18) B

Subculture is the set of values, attitudes, and ways of doing things that result from belonging to a certain ethnic, religious, racial, or other group with which a consumer closely identifies.

19) FALSE

20) D

Many companies consider college students as part of their contingent workforce. College students are technologically savvy. Once they are appropriately screened by the temp agencies, they are included in a database of available temporary workers.

21) C

Key investment decisions often center on personal objectives such as growth and/or income.

22) FALSE

23) FALSE

24) FALSE

In some countries management has more position power where they make unilateral decisions. In other countries, decision making is a shared responsibility between management and workers.

25) D

While layoffs in manufacturing seem to imply that American firms are becoming less competitive, the opposite is actually the case. The layoffs are the result of tremendous improvements in productivity in recent years, which have enabled U.S. manufacturing firms to produce more goods with fewer workers.

26) A

27) C

Businesses with the greatest potential to make the owner rich are those that are both hard to start and hard to keep going (manufacturing).

28) A

Public relations has the power to influence because it comes via the media, which is viewed as a trustworthy source.

29) B

30) B

Following the laws that apply to her business, and expecting employees to do the same, will protect the firm from paying the price of convictions for crimes that are clearly against the law; however, operating within a legal framework is only the first step toward behaving as an ethical company.

31) A

During the growth stage of the product life cycle sales are rapidly rising; there are very high profits and a growing number of competitors.

32) A

Using contingent workers is sensible strategy during uncertain economic times. College students also make good contingent workers. Often a firm will employ contingent workers to weed out the underperforming employees and permanently hire the good employees.

33) D

A well-prepared business plan is mandatory when seeking financial assistance from a bank or other investors.

34) B

A company may be exporting its entire product and deriving 100 percent of its sales and profits overseas, but that alone would not make it a multinational. A multinational corporation is an organization that has manufacturing and marketing operations in many different countries. It also has multinational stock ownership and multinational management.

35) FALSE

36) A

Diluted earnings per share takes into account stock options, convertible preferred stock, warrants, and other convertible debt securities in the earnings per share calculation. The addition of these sources of funds will dilute the earnings per share. It will be something less than the basic earnings per share calculation.

37) B

To work effectively, however, the process requires an accurate production schedule (using ERP) and excellent coordination with carefully selected suppliers, who are usually connected electronically so they know what will be needed and when. Sometimes the suppliers build new facilities close to the main producer to minimize distribution time.

38) D A limited partner invests in a partnership but has limited liability and does not take an active role in managing the business.

39) A

40) FALSE

41) FALSE

42) A

Picketing and boycotts are tactics that are used by *labor* rather than management. However, a lockout is a management tactic.

43) D

Business literature often notes that leaders and managers do not always share the same traits. For example, although managers typically strive for order and stability, leaders frequently embrace change.

44) A

45) C

The goal of relationship marketing is to keep individual customers over time by offering them products that exactly meet their requirements.

46) FALSE

47) TRUE

48) A

Empowerment means giving workers the authority and responsibility to respond quickly to customer requests. For empowerment to work, employees must be given the knowledge, tools, and freedom to make decisions without waiting for approval from their manager. Thus, a manager in an organization that relies on empowerment must be more like a coach and counselor than a boss or director who tells the workers exactly what to do.

49) B

Undercapitalization refers to the problem of insufficient cash to adequately fund the firm's activities. Our text suggests that undercapitalization and inadequate control over cash flows and expenses are the most common ways for a firm to fail financially.

50) C

Collective bargaining refers to the collective right of union members or their representation to enter into negotiations and discussions about union employee labor contracts and other types of issues such as fair wages, benefits, and unfair employment practices that affect workers.

51) C

Matrix organizations provide for efficient use of organizational resources.

52) TRUE

Appendix I

Sample Lesson Plan or Other Assignment Coding Sample

Boston Market Video Case

Undercover Boss – Boston Market CBO Sara Bittorf -

<http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x10jyab>

1. Click on the link above and watch the episode until the 18-minute mark (*although you are certainly welcome to watch the entire video*).

2, 3, 4

2. Pay particular attention to the situation between Sara, Ronnie, and Neil.

2

3. Answer the questions below, using what you have learned thus far, giving supporting details and well-argued points. **Note – When answering these questions, assume that Sara is acting in her role as Chief Brand Officer and not that of a disguised gameshow contestant.**

1, 2, 3, 4

Questions:

1, 2

- a. Summarize the situation between Sara, Ronnie, and Neil (6:35m – 18:00m in the video). (No need to go into detail here –please summarize the situation).
- b. Describe what you believe to be the role that Sara has within the company in her official capacity as CBO. What do you believe Sara (as Chief Brand Officer) must do? Be specific.
- c. Similar to question b., what roles and duties do Ronnie and Neil have? How do those roles interact with each other, and how do they interact with the role that Sara has on a broader scale? Be specific.
- d. In what way(s) do Ronnie, Neil, and Sara’s duties impact the establishment they are working in? (Consider the individual store in the episode.) Be specific.
- e. Neil, the store’s General Manager, seems very surprised by the situation with Ronnie. What is his (Neil’s) role, or what should it have been in this situation that has unfolded between Sara and Ronnie? Should he have known about their attitudes and views of Ronnie before Sara came? Should he have done anything differently before or after his private interaction with Sara? Be specific.
- f. Discuss the actions/words of Ronnie (summarize). Why, in your opinion, does he say the things he does? Is he a terrible employee or just having a bad day? Do you believe that some deeper issue caused disturbing words and actions from Ronnie? If so, what could that factor be? Be specific.
- g. In the end, Sara terminates Ronnie, but should she have done so? Why or Why not? Could something else have been done? It is clear that Ronnie has a bad attitude, but has he actually done anything that (in your opinion) justifies his termination? Could he have been given a warning instead or worked with? What would you have done if you were Sara? Be specific.

h. If Sara hadn't terminated Ronnie, what would have been the possible outcomes? Be specific.

i. BONUS QUESTION (Feel free to answer if you wish): Realizing that Sara is the CBO, do you think a different executive would have responded similarly to the situation with Ronnie? For example, the CMO (Chief Marketing Officer), COO (Chief Operations Officer), CFO (Chief Financial Officer), CHRO (Chief Human Resources Officer), Director of Supply Chain Management, etc. You may pick one (or several) and discuss an outcome you think they would have chosen.

Please submit your answers in a double-spaced, 12pt—Times New Roman font and APA 7th edition format. This assignment has no length requirement, but be sure to answer the questions sufficiently. Feel free to use outside resources or the textbook. Please cite your work.

1, 2, 3,