

RETENTION OF PREDOMINANTLY NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION CLASSES IN A LOCAL
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the impact of inclusion in retention for nontraditional students taking global learning classes (distance education) at XYZ Community College in the southeastern United States. It seeks to answer the central research question: How can social inclusion be used to retain nontraditional students at a local community college when taking online classes? The theory guiding this study was the social systems theory, which is concerned with inclusion and exclusion in social systems through communication. Social systems theory was utilized to understand how minority students are included or excluded at XYZ Community College. The study sample was purposively selected and comprised of male and female minority participants in any year of the study. The sample size was 10-12 participants, ages 18 and 50. Data was gathered from the students through semi-structured interviews, questionnaire questions, and journal prompts and analyzed through thematic coding to identify the most relevant patterns. The thematic analysis of the study provided insights into the inclusion and retention of non-traditional students in online classes at XYZ community colleges. Statistics indicate that timely feedback and effective communication contribute to students' sense of inclusion, increasing retention rates. Additionally, administration-led initiatives play a crucial role in promoting inclusion and retention. Recommendations include increasing inclusion efforts in online learning environments and implementing policies supporting the inclusion of non-traditional students. These findings offer practical strategies for creating equitable educational experiences in online settings.

Keywords: Inclusion, exclusion, retention, nontraditional minority students, global learning classes, distance education, asynchronous learning.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my God, the source of all wisdom and inspiration, from whom all good things flow. Your guidance and grace have been the cornerstone of my journey through this dissertation.

To my mother, the lady who has always been there for me, showing me the value of having a serving heart. Your selflessness and guidance have shaped my character, teaching me the importance of compassion and generosity.

To my father, who has shown me that anything is possible with work. Your resilience and commitment have been a constant source of inspiration, motivating me to strive for my goals with unwavering determination.

Papi and Mami, your lessons, love, and examples have been the foundation of my journey, and this achievement is as much yours as it is mine. Thank you for being the extraordinary individuals you are.

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List of Abbreviations

Global Learning (GL)

Social inclusion (SE)

Distance education (DE)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to understand the impact of inclusion in retention for nontraditional students taking global learning classes (distance education) at XYZ Community College in the southeastern the United States. This study investigates the impact of nontraditional student inclusion in a community college offering distance education classes. This chapter explores the history of distance learning and the benefits it has brought to XYZ Community College. Online learning is not a new concept, and this study investigates several learning methods, with a particular focus on distance learning. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has emerged as one of the most significant breakthroughs in education. Within this context, this chapter explores the history, culture, and theory of asynchronous learning in more depth. Then it discusses the problem statement purpose statement, the significance of the study, and the research question of the articles in detail. In addition, there are definitions and a synopsis of the dispute in this chapter.

Background

Higher education learner retention has grown into a national issue (Tinto, 1999, 1975). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) stated that approximately a quarter of learners tend to drop out of community college prior to the termination of their sophomore year (NCES, 2019). Student retention is a key element of a profitable institution. Attempts are constantly created to enhance student retention in higher learning institutions (Tinto, 1999). High student attrition can force community colleges to close courses or programs due to lack of attendance.

Historical Context

Understanding the factors that facilitate retention of students has been of general interest to researchers for decades. As post-secondary education has grown in importance, so has research on what variables affect students' abilities to complete their university studies (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Traditional measures such as college entrance exams and high school GPA are used heavily by universities to decide who gets accepted into college, but they have only moderate predictive power in anticipating who perseveres until the end of their program (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Allensworth et al., 2018; Fina et al. 2018). Educational programs in high school have aimed at better preparing students for college have also been moderately effective, but their lack of success points to social and academic pressures at the university itself that induces dropout (Lorenzo-Quiles et al., 2023).

Social Context

Community colleges do not operate like four-year universities. Students are often older, working, or did not have the academic pedigree to be accepted into other colleges (Baugus, 2020). Thus, they encounter different sets of challenges with retention. Research had demonstrated that burdens like childcare, transportation costs, and food insecurity – all factors for low socioeconomic status, older, working students – contribute to dropout (Baugus, 2020). Furthermore, given variable class times, community college students tend to spend less time on campus, interacting with classmates and faculty, leading to alienation and, eventually, dropout (Priat et al., 2021). These findings support previous assertions by researchers who have measured high rates of dropout among African American and Latino students who are physically disengaged from campus (Flynn, 2014).

Minority student populations also suffer from unique pressures that can facilitate low retention rates (Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2021). This is not always the case, however.

Statistical research has demonstrated that Asian Americans and African Americans actually have lower dropout rates than their white classmates, with Latino students and Native Americans failing to complete at the highest rates (Espinosa et al., 2019). Researchers have speculated that high rates of African American persistence are in part due to a plethora of on-campus community organizations specifically designed for African American student retention (Setwart et al., 2015). Furthermore, SAT scores are equally predictive for all ethnic groups, and GPA is only predictive for Latino students (Barbera et al., 2017).

Online students further complicate the picture. Online courses increase overall enrollment, as students who would be otherwise unable to attend courses due to time and travel constraints are able to take courses online. Asynchronous and synchronous learning environments are often contrasted in online education. They vary in that they teach and learn at various times and places: an asynchronous setting does not co-occur or in the exact location (Lopez et al., 2021). Therefore, rather than being reliant on the instructor, they are more autonomous and self-paced. Although web-based learning environments are convenient, in-person synchronous settings provide a more authentic and "rich" experience for students. There is less uncertainty in touch and less activation, as a result, say the authors. Students may work at their speed and without regard to location or time using asynchronous instruction. Still, not all students have the ability to make use of this potential benefit: There is a more critical requirement for self-study abilities for those who are learning from home, particularly in asynchronous scenarios. It includes having the drive and determination to keep studying. In addition, pupils must be able to work and study effectively with good digital abilities. Real-time communication and fast feedback make this sort of learning the most effective. There are several ways to make the gap between online and in-person learning less visible and offer a feeling of

individualization (Bansak & Starr, 2021). To communicate complicated ideas or profound thoughts, email is better than synchronous conversation. Students are concerned with how they study, how well they do academically, and how they present themselves in front of others. Learning practical skills in synchronous online environments is preferable, but students do better when the course is presented in an asynchronous format where students may make significant and insightful contributions. In addition, synchronous learning increases commitment and drive among students (Attanasio et al., 2019).

However, this also raises the number of busy, tired, and overtaxed students in courses, raising burnout (Fuenes & Mackness 2018). However, these dynamics drop significantly when the student is experienced (Fuenes & Mackness 2018). Students in later years of their education demonstrate lower dropout rates when taking online courses than first year students (Cochran et al., 2014). Distant learners do not receive adequate guidance or supervision from their instructors since they do not interact in real-time (Zaheer & Munir, 2020). Asynchronous virtual learning, where students work at their speed, requires a prominent level of self-control, self-regulation, and self-efficacy (Basri et al., 2021). In contrast, synchronous e-learners are more likely than their asynchronous counterparts to maintain regular contact, concentrate on their duties, contribute more, and complete their work and courses more often. As a result, students are more socially and emotionally attached and happy when they engage in synchronous engagement (Horowitz, 2020).

Research on experiences and educational outcomes due to discrimination in the classroom has a long history, and the consequences of inclusion and discrimination have also been extensively researched (Lopez et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2020). However, as remote learning environments have rapidly expanded in recent years, subsequent investigation into the impacts of

remote and blended classrooms have not yielded commensurate investigation from researchers (Ellis-Thompson et al., 2020).

Because of the COVID-19 epidemic, educators and students throughout the globe were compelled to learn how to utilize online teaching and learning swiftly. "Emergency Remote Teaching" is the term given to this method (Ferri et al., 2020). Tactics and improvisation were prevalent, which should be contrasted with the meticulous planning that goes into online learning (Ferri et al., 2020). Higher education institutions may employ the remote teaching approaches that have worked effectively to build well-thought-out online or blended learning arrangements while also enhancing or eliminating the ones that do not function in the post-pandemic or post-COVID classroom (Lopez et al., 2021).

During the outbreak, university students reported a lack of social interaction. As a result of the pandemic, students felt that their social support networks were more dispersed in online learning settings than in conventional classrooms (Horowitz, 2020). A study conducted before the pandemic found that this did not account for characteristics such as lower satisfaction with online learning (Meeter et al., 2020). Educators were urged to seek to close the "social presence gap" so that students can obtain the same results in varied environments.

People's conceptions of belonging, membership, and citizenship may change depending on a given location's history, culture, institutions, and social structures. The concept of belonging to a nation is defined in numerous ways in different countries, some even outlined in the law. Social inclusion is influenced by institutionalized, dominant, or even hegemonic beliefs of nationhood (Auxier & Anderson, 2020). Most of the rights and obligations of the nation are not afforded to non-citizens via formal citizenship. However, how individuals conceptualize belonging to a country also creates divisions. When it comes to history, nationalism tends to be selective. It

emphasizes the history and common ideals of the organization. Nationalist mythology depicts a united, welcoming society that welcomes everybody (Bansak & Starr, 2021).

Theoretical Context

There are extensive investigations regarding the academic preparedness and retention level of minorities attending higher education institutions and the impact of inclusion on student persistence (Brown, 2015; Denton, 2020; Tajfel, 2010; Tinto, 1975, 1999). Minority students tend to require more remediation in higher education than their counterparts (Yu et al., 2020).

One way this process may be understood is through social systems theory and the concepts of school inclusion and exclusion as described by Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021). Social systems theory was first developed by Niklas Luhman in the late 20th century. The theory is a sprawling attempt to explain social systems, their nature, how they develop, and perpetuate themselves. Luhman understood macrosystems to be constituted of subsystems perpetuated through communication. These communicative social interactions define the parameters of the subsystem through excluding individuals (Albert, 2022). Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) sought to define inclusion and exclusion within the context of education systems and their research was rooted in social systems theory. Rapp and Corral-Granados went further in their exploration of Luhman's research, aiming to elucidate the meaning of inclusion and exclusion within educational systems. They expanded upon established theoretical viewpoints concerning inclusion and exclusion in education, while also tackling the inadequacies and ambiguities associated with these concepts in previous scholarly works. In their study, Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) provided a comprehensive definition of exclusion in education, portraying it as an ongoing and dynamic process shaped by communication across various institutional and

organizational tiers, ultimately resulting in disparities between policy and implementation (p. 11).

Teaching and learning techniques may be categorized into those that are more and less interactive based on interactivity criteria. Learning materials, interactions with peers, and interactions with instructors are just some the ways educators can encourage students to be interested in the information they are learning (Attanasio et al., 2019). "Interactivity" describes this process. If students are engaged in collaborative forms like discussion and feedback, working with small groups, and delivering and getting feedback rather than lectures, self-assessments, or solo work, they are more likely to establish social relationships and be interested in online learning. Based on similar student involvement and interaction features, student-centered and teacher-centered methods to teaching and learning are classified. Variations in active and passive learning styles are often related with these methods of information gathering (Horowitz, 2020). In contrast to learner-instructor or learner-learner engagement, more frequent in synchronous online settings, learner-content interaction through learning materials is more common in asynchronous environments.

Problem Statement

The problem is that non-traditional students are commonly not provided with an equal level of collaboration or assistance that on-campus learners receive, with non-traditional minority students being disproportionately affected (Baker & Moyer, 2019). Institutions utilize distance learning courses to instruct their students with technological platforms that permit synchronous and asynchronous teaching delivery by videoconferencing (Samarraie, 2019). Advantages of teaching courses utilizing a remote modality are openings for collaboration between learners and

the opportunity to ask questions (Castelli, 2021). However, these advantages are not conferred equally.

Most literature addresses traditional or nontraditional students in a synchronous traditional learning environment rather than focusing on these underserved demographics taking global learning classes (Fuenes & Mackness 2018; Samarraie, 2019). This research aims to fill this research gap. Higher education institutions should go further than having a diverse student body in their universities and obtain inclusion (Phillips et al., 2020; Puritty et al., 2017). Many students taking online classes hope to be able to improve their quality of life by acquiring skills that will help them obtain gainful employment, and we should help them achieve their goals. High rates of dropout severely hamstring these goals.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study will be to understand the impact of inclusion in retention for nontraditional students taking global learning classes (distance education) at XYZ Community College in the southeastern the United States. At this stage in the research, student retention will be defined as the ability of an educational institution to keep students enrolled in classes and assist them in progressing toward completing their academic programs (Haverila et al., 2020).

Significance of the Study

This research addresses several significant research gaps in education, discrimination, inequality, and classroom technology. This study expands theoretical conceptions of inclusion and builds upon previous theories from Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021). It seeks to expand frameworks and understandings of the manifestations and consequences of educational ostracization and inclusion in online classroom environments. While work has been done on the

educational impacts of remote learning, the intersection of minority inclusion and remote learning remains underdeveloped (Attanasio et al., 2019; Horowitz, 2020). Thus, this study seeks to expand frameworks that have not been updated to reflect classroom realities. More specifically, it will incorporate perspectives of widespread distance learning. This study also generates useful data on the lived experiences of students. By examining data derived directly from the lived experiences of the target population, the study will yield unique empirical insights into the nature of online learning environments.

Empirical Significance

Insights from the empirical data can aid educators and policy leaders to ameliorate issues of discrimination plaguing educational institutions. Online education has grown in popularity among community college students globally during the last two decades (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). Or, to put it another way, research into how students' cultural backgrounds affect their cognitive development and learning results has dominated the cultural aspects of online learning (Zhao et al., 2022). Other research has investigated the perspectives and experiences of cross-cultural students and the resulting cultural mismatch in a multicultural online learning setting (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018). For example, if teachers are aware of cultural differences, students from ethnic minorities are more inclined to enroll in online courses (Armstrong-Mensah et al., 2020). When building online systems for underrepresented groups, examining how students are motivated to study online is important. Minority students' academic performance, social presence, and cognitive capacities are significantly affected by cultural differences in their online learning experiences (Stein et al., 2020). However, the researchers did not look at how technology usage, satisfaction, and social media use, among other things, impact academic accomplishment. Thus, they had no idea how minority pupils fared. Findings from an inquiry on

the link between online learning experiences and academic success among minority students are presented here.

Theoretical Significance

This research contributes to the theoretical body of knowledge as well. Researchers have worked extensively on the utility of collaborative learning and the importance of face-to-face interaction to engage students and elicit creative responses (Attanasio, 2019; Rapp & Corral Granados, 2021). This is not to say that distance learning environments are without merit, as others have postulated that online learning environments expand opportunities and can limit burdens placed on students (Garcia et al., 2021). This study connects this body of literature with other theoretical strains that addresses issues around diversity, discrimination, and differentiated teaching in the classroom (Auxier & Anderson, 2020). Thus, by combining approaches from disparate theoretical fields, this study will help illuminate the interaction between distance learning and minority students.

Research Questions

This research will investigate the experiences of non-traditional minority students at XYZ Community College. The research questions utilize hermeneutic investigation to investigate this phenomenon. They have been designed to examine the issue while focusing on inclusion when taking online courses, treatment from administrators, and the institution itself. The research questions are as follows:

Central Research Question

How can social inclusion be used as an instrument of retaining nontraditional students at a local community college when taking online classes?

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of nontraditional minority students regarding inclusion at XYZ Community College?

Sub-Question Two

How do nontraditional minority students experience the way they are treated by administrators compared to other non-minority students?

Sub-Question Three

What actions can the local community college take to accommodate and retain nontraditional students taking global classes?

Definitions

1. *Asynchronous Teaching*: The process of providing students with learning that they can access in their own time and can be delivered through tests, reading materials, and pre-recorded lectures (Ogbonna et al., 2019). Applications such as discussion boards and web-supported textbooks can be used to facilitate teaching (Ogbonna et al., 2019). Students and teachers are thus teaching and learning at different times.
2. *E-Inclusion*: Refers to the extent to which information and communication technologies are used to foster equality and enhance societal participation (Harris et al., 2020).
3. *Global/Distance learning*: teaching and utilizing innovations in technology where students take classes from their current location without attending a physical institution; this permits synchronous and asynchronous class meetings over the internet (Al-Samarraie, 2019).
4. *Inclusion*: The process of ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate fully in society (Bansak & Starr, 2021)

5. *Nontraditional Minority Students*: Nonwhite students as well as those conforming to nontraditional identities, including religious, ethnic, and sexual identities.
6. *Sense of belonging*: implies the extent to which people believe that they belong or fit in each environment (Sax & Blaney, 2018).
7. *Student retention*: The process of keeping students enrolled in a college or university until graduation (Tinto, 1975).
- 8.
9. *Synchronous*: When a teacher gives a live class online, complete with student audience.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of minority students that are students at XYZ Community College, and the impact of social inclusion at the institution, and the low rate of minority student retention at XYZ Community College. The problem is that distance education students are commonly not provided with an equal level of collaboration or assistance that on-campus learners receive, with minority students being disproportionately affected (Baker & Moyer, 2019). Distance learning courses are becoming increasingly common in higher education. Between the proliferation of educational technology and public health considerations brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, online courses have taken on new salience. Minority students are often victims of exclusion in the classroom and given the ubiquity of online and hybrid classroom environments, these difficulties are likely to be compounded.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This research focuses on the impact of social inclusion on retention of nontraditional minority students enrolled in online classes at the community college level. In the past decade, there has been increased research focus on enrollment trends, disparities, and underrepresented student populations in higher education (Luster-Edward & Martin, 2019; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020). Disparities in enrollment, retention, and graduation among some students of color not only have significant implications for graduation outcomes, but also for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in numerous professional sectors (Dorn et al., 2020; Espinosa et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2021; Montenovo et al., 2020; Schneider et al., 2018). While increased awareness has been brought to student retention disparities in college settings, most retention solutions and strategies proposed in existing research are rooted in an emphasis on diversity, rather than inclusion (Kang & Kaplan, 2019; Lewis & Shah, 2021; Quaye et al., 2019; Smith, 2020; Zabeli & Kaçaniku, 2021). To address the gap in existing research, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore students' lived experiences concerning social inclusion as an instrument to improve the retention of nontraditional minority students enrolled in online classes. This chapter introduces the conceptual framework, literature inclusion and exclusion, student retention, and retention in online courses. Finally, it includes a summary.

Conceptual Framework

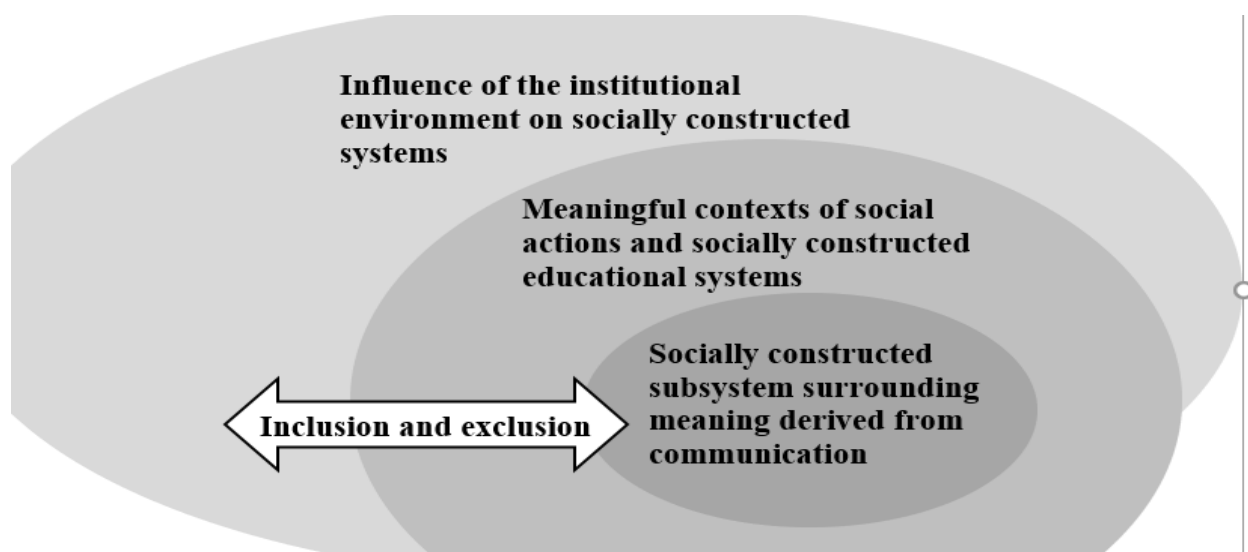
The conceptual framework of this research is rooted in the concepts of school inclusion and exclusion, as described in Rapp and Corral-Granados' (2021) research, and Tinto's Model (1975). Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) defined exclusion in education as "a continually ongoing process that is constructed through communication at different institutional and

organizational levels and creates gaps between policy and practice” (p. 11). Rapp and Corral-Granados research has its roots in social systems theory, articulated by Niklas Luhman in the late 20th century. Luhman’s constructivist approach theorized that society at large was comprised of macro and constituent subsystems that existed and are perpetuated through language and communication (Luhman, 1997, as cited in Albert, 2022). Luhman argued that societal structures are emergent from social interaction, namely through communication.

Rapp and Corral-Granados expanded on Luhman’s work and sought to define inclusion and exclusion within the context of education systems. The authors built on existing theoretical perspectives on inclusion and exclusion in education while addressing weaknesses and a lack of clarity surrounding both concepts in the existing literature. Rapp and Corral-Granados selected a framework of social systems theory, social constructivism, and the theory of institutionalism to guide their research, which was used to explore the mechanisms that facilitate inclusion and exclusion at different levels of educational institutions and systems (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Inclusion and Exclusion in Education



Note. This conceptual model depicts how inclusion and exclusion function within social systems in the context of education and was created by Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021). From Rapp, A. C., & Corral-Granados, A. (2021). Understanding inclusive education—a theoretical contribution from system theory and the constructionist perspective. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1-17.

Inclusion, by contrast, was described as the opposite: a process of social construction involving communication at different levels of educational systems that bridges gaps between policy and practice. The researchers identified three key implications pertaining to how their model could inform efforts in policy and practice to enhance inclusion in education (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). First, the researchers emphasized that the macro-level systems influence societal and social systems, in addition to education systems, propel inclusion and exclusion. Second, the researchers noted that while many schools regard healthcare, special education, and social services as municipal-level concerns and ignore or subcategorize them, accordingly, doing so can lead to a loss of control or regard for inclusion and exclusion during implementation. Third, the researchers emphasized the distinct and ongoing influence of communication that occurs in the context of social interactions in educational settings, and how a social systems perspective lends insight into the significance of these social interactions in the context of inclusion and exclusion in education. Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) concluded by highlighting the validity and significance of their theoretical approach for future studies that are intended to promote inclusive education, noting that “Policy analyses, interviews with educational personnel, and classroom observations can identify meaningful, repetitive communication systems that inclusively and exclusively utilize binary codes”, and that their theoretical perspective could be used to help members of educational organizations “identify and

reflect on how they are conversing and what types of communication they are constructing so that they can understand how these are inclusive for some students and exclusive for others” (p. 13).

In the current study, Rapp and Corral- Granados (2021) model will be used to explore how inclusion and exclusion are fostered within school systems. Further, Rapp and Corral- Granados’ (2021) model will also be used to explore how inclusion and exclusion shape the experiences of nontraditional minority students enrolled in online classes at XYZ Community College.

An additional theoretical framework used in this study is Tinto’s Model, an influential theory in higher education that explains why some students persist and succeed in their academic pursuits while others leave or drop out of college (Nicoletti, 2019). The theory was developed by Vincent Tinto and it focused on the various factors that influence a student's decision to persist or depart from their educational institution (Finchman et al., 2021). According to Tinto's theory, student departure is a complex process influenced by a combination of academic, social, and institutional factors (Tinto, 1975). The theory also posits that students are more likely to persist in college if they are able to integrate into the academic and social life of the school (Tinto, 1975). Tinto emphasized that a student’s decision to persist in or leave college is influenced by three factors which consists of pre-college factors, academic integration, and social integration (Hadjar et al., 2022). Pre-college factors include students’ academic abilities, their educational and occupational goals, and their social and cultural background (Tinto, 1975). Academic integration refers to students' involvement in the academic life of the institution, such as their performance in classes, their interactions with faculty and staff, and their participation in extracurricular activities (Tinto, 1975). The social integration refers to students' involvement in

the social life of the institution, such as their interactions with peers, their participation in student organizations, and their sense of belonging to the institution (Tinto, 1975). According to Tinto's theory, students who are able to successfully integrate into the academic and social life of the institution are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and commitment to the institution (Hadjar et al., 2022). This, in turn, makes them more likely to persist in college.

In this study, Tinto's Model will serve as the theoretical framework to comprehensively investigate the factors influencing the retention of nontraditional students in distance education classes. Tinto's Model is particularly relevant as it underscores the significance of successful academic and social integration for students' persistence in college (Tinto, 1975). However, in the context of distance education, achieving such integration can present unique challenges due to factors like time constraints and geographical distance. These challenges are particularly pronounced for nontraditional students, who often have distinct learning styles and needs compared to their traditional counterparts. By adopting Tinto's Model, this study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of how nontraditional students navigate the intricacies of distance education, including the barriers they encounter in their efforts to integrate academically and socially.

Related Literature

This research focuses on the nexus of social inclusion for minority students and remote learning in community college classrooms. Both topics have significant literature associated with them. To develop a robust literature review, I performed an extensive search and analysis of existing research related to these topics. The search involved searching online databases including Taylor and Francis, Google Scholar, and JSTOR using relevant keyword searches. Further sources were identified through investigating references of seminal papers on the subject.

This section is a result of these investigation and proceeds with the resulting analysis. This section includes the following subsections: inclusion and exclusion in online college classes, experiences with nontraditional minority students, curriculum design and pedagogy in online classes, retention disparities in online classes, retention of nontraditional minority students, and finally, a summary.

The increasing prevalence of online courses in education has sparked a surge of research interest in understanding inclusion and exclusion dynamics within online learning environments. While online classrooms offer unique advantages such as expanded access and reduced costs, they also present challenges that can hinder inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups. The paradoxical nature of online education, which simultaneously expands and hampers participation, underscores the need for intentional pedagogical strategies that foster inclusion. Researchers have examined inclusion and exclusion from various perspectives, with a focus on pedagogy, curriculum, and policy (Brown, 2015; Denton, 2020; Tajfel, 2010; Tinto, 1975, 1999). Their findings underscore the importance of clear frameworks, humanizing pedagogies, and addressing structural inequalities to promote meaningful inclusion in online education. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and highlighted the need for effective strategies to enhance inclusion in the rapidly transitioning online learning landscape (Beaunoyer et al., 2020). By considering e-inclusion and the factors that influence it, educators can contribute to a more equitable and interactive online higher education environment.

Inclusion and Exclusion in Online College Classes

As online courses have been offered at increasing rates in multiple levels of education, researchers have expressed growing interest in understanding the dynamics of inclusion and

exclusion in online learning environments in efforts to improve inclusion (Coman et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2019; Green et al., 2020; Meskhi et al., 2019; Mseleku, 2020; Valcarlos et al., 2020). Characteristics of an inclusive classroom include prioritizing students' concerns, experiences, and identities and is leadership by a responsive and reflexive educator that understands the significance of interpersonal student-teacher relationships. Online classrooms offer unique costs and benefits to students, making them a valuable topic of study.

Understanding the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in online learning environments involves various aspects. Researchers have examined factors such as accessibility and availability of resources, technological proficiency, socio-economic disparities, cultural differences, and individual learning preferences (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020). By analyzing these elements, researchers can identify barriers to inclusion and develop evidence-based approaches to overcome them.

Online environments present fundamental differences from traditional classrooms. While online classrooms promise to expand the reach of educational institutions, lower costs, and reduce burdens of travel times, it does not fully remove all barriers to inclusion faced by minority groups. Differing access to resources, internet access, and adequate technology remain. The aspirational nature of discourse around online education hides significant challenges posed by the nature of online discourse. Fuenes and Mackness (2018) highlight the paradoxical challenges posed by open education. As online classes lower barriers to entry, they also allow for larger and less connected forms of communication. Asynchronous videos, text-based mass communication, and video conferencing empower teachers to increase the scale without gains in quality. Those who are less active in an online environment are thus ostracized from the group to a degree that would not be seen in an in-person classroom. Not only are the students absent from

classroom discussion, but the physical distance compounds the isolation. Fuenes and Mackness thus argue that online education's ability to include larger and larger communities presents increased problems with inducing participation.

While researchers have explored inclusion and exclusion in online learning from multiple perspectives and approaches, most researchers have chosen to focus on inclusion and exclusion in the context of pedagogy, curriculum, and/or policy (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020; Mseleku, 2020; Valcarlos et al., 2020). Exploring inclusion and exclusion in online education from a pedagogical perspective, Valcarlos et al. conducted a critical review of ten peer-reviewed studies. The researchers characterized educators who promote inclusion in online learning as those who fostered participation among their students by improving understanding through frequent communication and pedagogical strategies. Valcarlos et al. (2020) concluded by emphasizing the importance of establishing frameworks to promote inclusion and prevent exclusion in online education that purposefully and clearly inform pedagogical decisions.

Like the focus of Valcarolos et al. (2020) research, Mehta and Aguilera (2020) explored the role of pedagogy in promoting inclusive online education. The researchers emphasized a common critique of online courses: that they are impersonal and lacks opportunities for social interaction that contribute positively to learning processes. Accordingly, Mehta and Aguilera used a critical pedagogy perspective to inform the interrogation of trends and patterns in online education research. Their analysis revealed the need for humanizing pedagogies in online courses. Further, the authors used vignettes of their personal experiences teaching online courses to demonstrate how the conflict between ideological and autonomous visions of humanizing pedagogy affects inclusion in online education, such as special consideration for deaf students or students whose native language was not English. These findings conform with earlier work by

Barksdale (2019), who investigated persistence among second language learners in community colleges. Language barriers posed significant barriers not only with understanding classroom material, but also in communicating with classmates, socialization, and instructors. For nontraditional students, especially first and second-generation English language learners, online education can exacerbate challenges (Barksdale, 2019).

Key findings from Mehta and Aguilera's (2020) study lent insight into how the automation and digitization of education creates challenges with regards to inclusion and racialization. Furthermore, the humanizing elements of education can be constrained by systemic and institutional constraints. Mehta and Aguilera concluded by emphasizing the need to enact critical interrogation of the ideological elements of humanizing pedagogies and address the influence of social inequality directly regardless of educational context or environment. However, the researchers also recognized the influence of structural challenges that result in discrepancies of privilege and power that shape educators' pedagogical potential.

Researchers who have sought to critically analyze the concepts of inclusion and exclusion at various levels of education have emphasized various conceptual weaknesses that contribute to gaps between knowledge, practices, and policies surrounding inclusive education (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). As Slee (2019) emphasized, discourses surrounding what is meant by inclusion and exclusion are often appropriated in educational policies and communications based on the understanding that a growing number of students are seeking higher education institutions that promote inclusivity. By using inclusive language in policies that is incongruent with pedagogical practices and other critical elements of inclusive education, many universities seek the student recruitment benefits of promoting inclusion without facilitating inclusive education in practice. Beyond the lack of meaningful efforts to address inclusion in practice, Slee (2019) was

critical of schools that express unshakeable commitment to inclusivity in policies and discourse while doing little to disrupt norms and enhance inclusion in a way that could meaningfully shape students' experiences. Slee argued that privilege was not just possessing material resources, but social resources as well, expressed in belonging. Education systems enforce pedagogical "best practices" that perpetuate these forces of inclusion and exclusion.

Inclusion and other issues in online education have become particularly relevant due to the rapid and widespread transition to online courses implemented by many schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mseleku, 2020; Parmigiani et al., 2021). During the pandemic, many educators who had not previously taught online courses were required to shift their classes to online learning environments in a rapid timeframe while maintaining a high level of education quality. Though the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for learning outcomes at different levels of education are not well understood, preliminary research suggests that many existing facets of inequality that exacerbated exclusion in online learning before the pandemic have grown in magnitude. In a review of 85 existing peer-reviewed studies, Mseleku (2020) identified themes related to differences between online and offline learning, responses from higher education institutions to the COVID-19 pandemic, the influence of COVID-19 on academic outcomes, challenges associated with teaching and learning online, and learning opportunities facilitated by the pandemic. Findings associated with these themes indicated that while most higher education institutions shifted all coursework to online formats for some period during the pandemic, challenges including internet connectivity, students and educators adjusting poorly, and the availability of resources have had a detrimental effect on learning outcomes. Despite these challenges, some school leaders have been motivated to implement innovative and beneficial changes necessitated by the need to move all coursework to online formats, such as

implementing improved online learning systems and allocating resources to developing educators' online teaching skills (Mseleku, 2020).

A limited number of existing publications include references to the concepts of inclusion and exclusion to refer to students' ability to access online higher education (Harris et al., 2020; Parmigiani et al., 2021). Unlike most definitions of inclusion used in online education research that center on social inclusion, e-inclusion refers to the extent to which information and communication technologies are used to foster equality and enhance societal participation. By this definition, online college courses that successfully promote inclusion contribute to social equality by addressing barriers that prevent individuals from succeeding or prospering in society. Through examination of the approaches of these courses, one may garner insights into the most effective strategies for overcoming barriers to inclusion within and outside academia. Harris et al. (2020) also regarded online learning options as a tool to promote inclusion in higher education. In spring of 2020 most college educators were in the mindset of rushing to transition in-person courses to online formats, educators whose courses are still being offered in online format years later now can refine their courses and improve student inclusion (Harris et al. 2020). Harris et al. specifically promoted the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), culturally responsive pedagogy, trauma-informed pedagogy, and management of expectations and attitudes as teaching practices that promote inclusion in online learning environments. Concerning course designs, Harris et al. promoted active learning as a course design element that facilitates inclusion in online learning environments. They further advocated the "flipped classroom model", wherein most of the group work is accomplished in the classroom rather than outside it. Clearly articulating participation norms and expectations, they argue, further improves participation. Finally, providing effective learning resources that accommodate diverse learning

styles could help students from being alienated. Equity concerns that were emphasized by the authors included students' ability to access technologies, modes of course delivery, and the accessibility of course materials hosted online.

While Harris et al. (2020) and other researchers have offered specific recommendations for improving inclusion in online college courses, Parmigiani et al. (2021) argued the COVID-19 pandemic presents a complicated context for developing or enhancing e-inclusion in higher education when many learners are completely isolated from in-person support and resources. In an investigation of e-inclusion in Italian higher education institutions, Parmigiani et al. collected and analyzed the open-ended questionnaire responses of 785 college educators. The researchers found that the factors that had the most significant influence on e-inclusion stemmed from technology, familial relationships, and classroom environments, noting the important role teachers played in fostering an inclusive and interactive educational environment. Parmigiani et al.'s findings highlight how certain pedagogical decisions, resources, and social interactions contribute to e-inclusion in online higher education.

Online education across various educational levels has sparked significant research interest in understanding the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within online learning environments. While online classrooms offer unique advantages, they also present challenges that hinder full inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups. The paradoxical nature of online education, with its potential for increased scale but decreased connectedness, poses significant challenges to fostering participation and engagement. Researchers have explored inclusion and exclusion in online education from various perspectives, with a particular focus on pedagogy, curriculum, and policy. Their findings emphasize the importance of establishing clear frameworks and adopting humanizing pedagogies to promote inclusion in online courses.

Preliminary research suggests that existing inequalities have been exacerbated, highlighting the need for effective strategies to enhance inclusion.

Experiences of Nontraditional Minority Students

As findings mentioned earlier in this section indicate, inclusion and exclusion are not experienced equally by students of color in online courses and other learning environments. Students have different socio-economic resources, learning needs, and educational backgrounds. Thus, some students are disproportionately likely to experience exclusion in comparison to their peers, particularly students who are underrepresented minorities in the context of a particular online learning environment (Borup et al., 2020; Chiu et al., 2021; Day et al., 2019; Kizilcec & Saltarelli, 2019; O’Keefe et al., 2020; Perets et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2020). While the term *nontraditional student*, or nontraditional minority student, is often used to refer to a student who is older than the normative age range for a given degree program or level of education, nontraditional minority students can be any students whose demographics differ from the majority of their peers (Remenick, 2019). Thus, nontraditional minority students may be minorities on the bases of gender, race, employment status, and other characteristics and have differentiated levels of educational attainment.

While nontraditional students have a longstanding history of obtaining higher education in the United States, ensuring that nontraditional students receive equitable higher education is a relatively recent priority (Remenick, 2019). In a historical literature review, Remenick identified four distinct periods throughout United States history that reflect shifts and trends in nontraditional student populations and nontraditional student education. Remenick specifically found a period of nontraditional students’ enrollment in normal schools from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, nontraditional WWII veteran students who utilized the GI Bill to obtain higher

education during and after the 1940s, nontraditional student utilization of federal financial aid to seek community college degrees during and after the 1960s, and nontraditional student participation in online learning during and after the 1990s. Concerning the fourth period of interest, Remenick regarded university students who sought online courses due to an inability to attend in-person classes as a nontraditional student population:

Students who enrolled in the first online courses of the late 1990s and early 2000s tended to be older adults... They completed more credit hours and had a higher-grade point average (GPA) than their traditional peers... but were more likely to drop their courses. As a result of the high dropout rates, greater research was dedicated to understanding the attrition rates and how institutions could help (p. 119).

Remenick's (2019) description of early enrollees in online university courses is in stark contrast to current enrollment trends, patterns, and characterizations of nontraditional online student populations. In contrast to general college student populations at the time, students enrolled in online college courses during the 1990s and early 2000s were often students who had no other option for pursuing online education if online courses were not available. By contrast, online college students could not accurately be described as a nontraditional student population at the time of this study; in the wake of countless higher education institutions moving most or all of their courses to online formats for some length of time during the COVID-19 pandemic, participation in online coursework could be considered a characteristic of traditional, or normative, college students (Parmigiani et al., 2021). Efforts to remedy these differentiated enrollment patterns are ongoing.

In acknowledgment of disparities pertaining to inclusion experienced by nontraditional minority students enrolled in online courses, researchers have proposed and evaluated different

solutions designed to improve inclusion (Lambert, 2020). Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) was a solution for improving inclusion in online classes that was investigated by Lambert. As Lambert explained, MOOCs were developed in efforts to improve inclusion in online higher education through the provision of free online courses. Advocates of MOOCs emphasize how they improve the accessibility and inclusiveness of online education for students who cannot afford or meet the eligibility requirements necessary to enroll in online college courses (Paton et al., 2018). Further, MOOCs were designed to enhance social inclusion among students traditionally excluded from online college courses by helping them to build professional skills and knowledge. However, critics of MOOCs have emphasized that providing MOOCs is not a guaranteed means of addressing exclusion issues, as some MOOCs focus on inclusion in some areas while overlooking exclusion in others. For instance, offering an MOOC may enhance inclusion in online higher education for socioeconomically disadvantaged students without addressing the exclusion of students who are non-English speakers. In acknowledgment of these limitations, Lambert conducted a systematic review of 46 existing studies on MOOCs to evaluate how MOOCs contribute to inclusion and equity in online education. Lambert found that most existing research on MOOCs promoted the goals of enhancing social inclusion and/or student equity, particularly for unprepared or struggling students. Despite critiques in past research, Lambert also determined that many emerging MOOCs also promoted student equity and social inclusion for non-English speaking students through multi-lingual and non-English course options. However, Lambert also concluded that MOOCs are most effective for promoting social inclusion and student equity when other resources and forms of support, such as study groups, are available to help students succeed.

While a growing body of research includes evidence-based insights and conclusive findings surrounding the nature of inclusion for nontraditional minority students enrolled in online college courses, recent literature that provides insight into the self-reported inclusion-related experiences of nontraditional minority students remains extremely limited. In one such study, Faulkner et al. (2021) conducted six focus groups involving 39 marginalized, nontraditional university student participants to gather their perspectives on how educators can improve the inclusion of nontraditional minority students in in-person and online courses. Participants' responses primarily centered on educators' characteristics, teaching behaviors, curriculum, the contexts surrounding student-teacher interactions, and teaching materials. Further, all participants emphasized the significance of student-teacher relationships, and educators whose communication behaviors were supportive and immediate were viewed as more inclusive and welcoming by participants.

Research examining the experiences of nontraditional minority students in online courses highlights disparities in inclusion that are not experienced equally by all students (Remenick, 2019). The historical context of nontraditional student enrollment reveals shifts and trends in higher education, with online education emerging as a nontraditional option for students seeking alternative pathways. However, current enrollment patterns and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have reshaped the perception of online courses, making them more normative for traditional college students. Efforts to address disparities in inclusion for nontraditional minority students are ongoing, and researchers have proposed various solutions, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), to improve accessibility and social inclusion in online education. While MOOCs have shown potential in enhancing inclusion and equity, limitations exist in addressing all forms of exclusion. Systematic reviews have identified the importance of

additional resources and support to maximize the benefits of MOOCs. Furthermore, the self-reported experiences of nontraditional minority students in online courses emphasize the significance of educator characteristics, teaching behaviors, student-teacher relationships, and inclusive classroom environments. By prioritizing student concerns, identities, and experiences, and fostering supportive and immediate communication, educators can play a pivotal role in enhancing inclusion for nontraditional minority students in both online and in-person courses.

Student Retention in Online College Classes

Student retention has been a longstanding concern in higher education (Tight, 2020). While similar emphasis has been placed on student enrollment and graduation rates in existing research, student retention is of particular concern for college students enrolled in online courses (Sithole et al., 2019). Online courses present unique circumstances that can impact student retention rates, necessitating specialized attention from researchers and educators. Promoting student retention in online courses extends beyond the individual student. Institutions of higher education have a vital role in creating a supportive infrastructure that recognizes and addresses the unique needs of online learners (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

Nationally, retention of higher education students is a significant issue that negatively affects student outcomes (Tinto, 1999). Students who are just starting their higher education journeys are particularly likely to drop out, as The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported; specifically, 25% of learners drop out of their degree programs on average before they complete their sophomore year of college (NCES, 2019). When online higher education retention is considered, evidence indicates higher drop-out rates than in-person courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019). However, existing research indicates significant complexities in the relationship between student retention and enrollment in online college courses. For instance,

most research indicates higher dropout rates in online college courses in comparison to in-person courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

A recent study conducted by Wavle and Ozogul (2019) indicated that participation in online courses increases the likelihood that college students in a multitude of degree programs will successfully complete their degrees. The intent of their research was to enhance understanding of how online course participation influences the experiences and completion rates of college students in four-year programs to inform the decisions of college administrators, faculty, and advisors. The researchers treated student demographics, campus type, and academic performance as control variables. Analysis of student data revealed that enrollment in one or more online college courses significantly increased the likelihood of undergraduate students completing their degree programs, regardless of the type of campus they attended. However, in the second part of the study analysis of course grades indicated that depending on students' campus type they obtained slightly lower or slightly higher grades depending on whether they had taken one or more online college courses. That is, selection of online courses increased eventual graduation rates regardless of attrition within courses. These findings led the researchers to conclude that college student retention in online courses is a complex phenomenon that, when researched, is context-bound and influenced significantly by methodological choices.

Online education has allowed for a massive increase in access to education. Indeed, increased remote education opportunities have been readily accepted by students nationwide. Remote learning environments, cheaper enrollment fees, lack of travel, and asynchronous learning all offer reduced burdens on potential students. However, despite the offer of a cheaper, easier education, online student attrition is significantly larger than in-person classes, with attrition rates ranging from 40-80% (Bawa, 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019). Speculation abounds

as to the reason for this large rate, especially when by all accounts online education should impose lower costs on students. Bawa (2016) offered a solution, whereby the researcher posed that it was precisely the lowered barriers that caused students to drop out. Students with access to the internet, but do not otherwise have the financial, transportation, or time resources to dedicate to in-person courses might take online classes as a substitute. However, these students systematically underestimate the demands. Online courses still require time, energy, and academic focus to pass. Thus, lower barriers to entry invite students who are ill-prepared for their course load. Bawa (2016) thus suggests online courses act as a filtering mechanism, whereby students who are already under increased burdens take online courses and drop out at a higher rate.

In acknowledgment of differences in student retention between college students in online and in-person courses, Chase et al. (2020) used a community of practice strategy to understand how challenges and barriers experienced by online university students contribute to low retention rates. Identifying participation in online courses as a risk factor for college attrition, the following four challenges were identified as having a significant influence on online student retention including student-teacher relationships, lack of empirical data, feelings of belonging and inclusion, and access to educational resources. Chase et al. concluded by recommending targeted interventions that work synergistically as a means of making meaningful progress towards improved retention among college students enrolled in online courses. Despite these findings, other research suggests that online education is still in its infancy, and has not developed the same level of expertise, comfort, classroom content, and pedagogy as traditional classrooms. While students who take these courses may be at higher risk of dropout, the course design may also contribute to the problem. Less than ideal approaches to virtual education may

also provide challenges to both students and teachers. Many of these challenges could be ameliorated by updated pedagogical approaches specifically tailored to online environments.

In summary, student retention in higher education, particularly for those enrolled in online courses, remains a significant concern. However, research has also shown the complex relationship between student retention and enrollment in online courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019). There are positive impacts of online course participation on degree completion rates, regardless of campus type, while also noting slight variations in course grades depending on campus type. These findings emphasize the contextual nature of student retention in online courses and the influence of methodological choices. Despite the increased accessibility and convenience offered by online education, high attrition rates persist. Lowered barriers to entry may attract students who are ill-prepared for the demands of online coursework. Challenges related to student-teacher relationships, lack of empirical data, feelings of belonging, inclusion, and access to educational resources have been identified as significant factors contributing to low retention rates in online courses. Targeted interventions and pedagogical approaches tailored to online environments are recommended to address these challenges and improve retention. As online education continues to evolve, it is crucial to develop expertise, comfort, and effective pedagogical strategies to enhance student success and retention in online learning.

Curriculum Design and Pedagogy in Online Classes

The recent COVID-19 pandemic forced many higher education faculty into online teaching environments where they had little training or expertise. The forced transition yielded a significant mismatch between teaching skills, curricula, and student needs. Although the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the issue, challenges of online curriculum design forced instructors to rethink their assumptions about effective instruction both before and after the

health crisis (Albrahim, 2020; Archambault et al. 2022). As technology has proliferated and higher education offers increasing numbers of online courses, instructors have struggled to adapt to the differing pressures of online education (Albrahim, 2020). The shift requires a significant paradigm shift among instructors to meet the unique needs of an online audience, specifically to develop interpersonal relationships with remote pupils.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a significant drop in education efficacy (Engzell et al., 2021). This has led some researchers to point the proverbial finger at online education as a contributing factor. Yet upon closer examination, researchers have argued that the downward pressure on educational outcomes was not the pandemic per se, but rather the chaotic implementation thereof and the lack of training programs for teachers in a new educational environment (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, criticisms of online education fall disproportionately on younger learners. School and an in-class environment is a critical component in socialization and emotional intelligence among younger students, but in higher education it is not such an issue (Timmons et al., 2020). Researchers have convincingly argued that any deleterious effects of the move towards online teaching was not due to any intrinsic weakness of online education, but rather the chaotic nature of the move and high switching costs imposed on teachers and students (Bailey et al., 2021). That does not mean the switch to online education, pandemic notwithstanding, is without its costs.

In the years preceding the pandemic, higher education leaders recognized both the promise and potential challenges of online education, and the attendant additional training needed to turn classroom teachers into effective online educators. Education for teachers is still largely predicated on pedagogy and approaches designed and implemented in face-to-face environments. Issues of communication, classroom management, material distributions are all

categorically different in an online environment. Furthermore, in higher education, where lecturers typically receive less teaching training than their high school and elementary school counterparts, many teachers have struggled with a reorientation towards online learning, although some were early adopters (Albrahim, 2020). Where fully online curricula exist, they are largely derivative from courses originally intended to be taught in a traditional learning space, creating a disconnect between pedagogical approach and medium of communication (Mohanasundaram, 2018). To ameliorate this, disconnect, efforts have been made to retrain teachers in new and more effective methods. Curriculum design must consider four components: What are the broader goals of the program beyond the classroom, what is actually taught, the experiences of the participants and how those experiences intersect with the larger program and teachers (Mohanasundaram, 2018).

Initiatives to incorporate online pedagogy and curriculum-specific courses into teacher training are ongoing, and there is an ongoing conversation about the need and parameters of such programs. Teachers struggles with online education are often underpinned by discomfort with technology, uncertainty about evaluation tools, and the perception of disconnect with their students (Albrahim, 2020; Wasserman & Migdal, 2019). Furthermore, teachers have also reported that online education undermines their self-perceptions and roles as “educators” (Albrahim, 2020). Proposals to improve teacher performance seek to strengthen these weaknesses, with redesigning of curricula with an eye towards student engagement, technology, and improved educational outcomes. Many of these initiatives have been effective, with increasing rates of passing among higher education students (Zhao et al., 2018).

Despite the apparent differences between face-to-face and online education, instructors have also expressed surprise at the similarities between online and traditional teaching. In one

qualitative questionnaire, adjunct instructors at an American college reported high rates of interaction with pupils and among the students. Furthermore, they reported little change between their online and in-person teaching styles (Lewis & Wang, 2015). The findings of Lewis and Wang (2015) could indicate that there is less difference between online and traditional teaching than instructors and administrators feared. Other research by Wasserman and Migdal (2019) measured teaching attitudes towards online education against teaching abilities, approaches towards lessons, and understanding of technological issues. They found that the most important factors in a teacher's attitude towards online teaching was the level of comfort with technological tools. Wasserman and Migdal's (2019) research suggest that technology remains a barrier in teacher's attitudes toward remote education. As teachers master the tools of remote learning, they are likely to become more confident in their abilities. However, as the research focused on teacher perceptions rather than empirical measures of efficacy, this research is inconclusive as to the merits of their perceptions.

Course designs and learning platforms used for online college courses are elements of the online learning experience that can shape students' learning experiences and outcomes (Detres et al., 2020; Moore & Rutledge, 2018). In acknowledgment of student retention issues associated with online learning, researchers such as Moore and Rutledge (2018) have highlighted how course design and learning platform-related factors can be leveraged to reduce disparities in course completion between traditional and online courses. Some online learning tools, including Learning Management Systems (LMSs), have shown promise in existing literature as a means of facilitating enhanced interaction and student engagement in computer-mediated learning environments (Detres et al.). LMSs are not a cure-all, however, and must be effectively implemented to have the desired effects. Software design, user interface, and usability are all

required to ensure students engage with the software and, by extension, the class. Students themselves must be trained on LMSs, ensuring they have a firm grasp of how to use it. This is especially true for older students, who may have a less-intuitive grasp of the technology.

While existing research suggests that the use of LMSs can enhance students' online learning experiences in a way that impacts online student retention, the efficacy of LMSs can vary (Detres et al., 2020). Further, as Moore and Rutledge (2018) noted, the ways in which LMSs are used to facilitate favorable student outcomes in online courses can vary. More specifically, they recommended the implementation of guided learning employed through adaptive release as a best practice for facilitating favorable student outcomes in online college courses, noting the significant impact that guided learning had on students and faculty enrolled in or teaching an introductory Management Information Systems 1000 (MIS 1000) class at the college level. Concerning the influence of guided learning on student outcomes, Moore and Rutledge concluded: "that when applied to the online course, it further forces some self-regulation, engages the student in the course, serves as an early warning system to allow faculty intervention, and increases student achievement and overall retention" (p. 21). These findings highlight how LMSs can shape student outcomes in online courses.

The role of LMSs in online college student retention was also emphasized by Enwere and Okeke (2020). Their study specifically centered on investigating the effects of an LMS on academic retention among financial accounting students in comparison to traditional lecture-guided learning. Upon collecting and analyzing student data from 257 financial accounting students who were taking part in either online or lecture-based courses, the researchers found that in comparison to the lecture method, LMS-guided online courses contributed to improved student retention. LMS use should guide online financial accounting education to support

favorable retention rates and other favorable student outcomes. Enwere and Okeke's results reinforce Moorland Rutledge's (2018) findings that LMSs can facilitate favorable retention rates in online college courses. However, further research is needed to identify the design features of LMS-guided classrooms to maximize retention.

Teachers remain a critical component of efficacious online teaching. Their competencies, perceptions, and experiences shape curricula and pedagogical approaches to education writ large, and with online teaching. The growing demand of online education has had a commensurate effect on teacher approaches in the classroom, whether in person or digital. Their perceptions of online education remain wary, but research has demonstrated an increasing degree of both acceptance and efficacy (Lewis & Wang, 2015; Wasserman & Migdal, 2019; Zhao et al., 2018). Initially, some educators may have been hesitant or skeptical about the effectiveness of online teaching, concerned about the loss of personal interaction and the potential challenges associated with technology (Saha et al., 2022). However, as online education has become more prevalent and research on its impact has accumulated, many teachers have come to recognize its advantages and opportunities.

Complex issues related and unrelated to inclusion and exclusion contribute to retention issues in online learning environments. These issues affect students differently and shape their learning experiences. Further, as Paulsen and McCormick (2020), some existing research that lends preliminary insight into factors that influence online student retention fails to address the multitude of student characteristics and compounding factors that also shape students' online education experiences. For instance, Paulsen and McCormick observed the following concerning research comparing student engagement in online courses to engagement in face-to-face courses. They point out that research has highlighted the positive impact of online learning on student

engagement. It has been found to have positive attributes, providing a high level of academic rigor, academic achievement, satisfaction, and effective learning practices. That is not to say that face-to-face learning was found to be lacking. Indeed, in-person students reported high levels of educational and environmental support, benefits from collaborating with other students, and closer relationships with their teachers. Thus, it would seem that both online and in-person learning environments provide significant, albeit differing advantages to learners.

One significant blind spot on the literature, however, is a lack of granularity when measuring demographics. Students were polled as an entire population, without controlling for other factors such as age, gender, enrollment status (part-time or full-time), or other responsibilities that could affect their experience. Furthermore, the research did not adequately investigate students enrolled in both online and in person courses. These students are likely to have a unique perspective on the nature and desirability of online learning. Furthermore, in-person students can easily eschew participation, allowing their mere presence in the classroom to act as intellectual buy-in. However, online courses often have online discussion requirements that demand interaction with both classmates and the material.

Upon conducting propensity score matching using data obtained from the 2015 National Survey of Student Engagement data, Paulsen and McCormick (2020) determined that many disparities in student engagement between online and in-person courses are explained by demographic differences. These findings led Paulsen and McCormick to conclude that research highlighting differences in learning strategies and the extent of support or collaboration in different learning environments are better explained by student characteristics than the mode of learning, despite significant evidence that online learning fails to provide the same level of collaborative learning and faculty interaction as in-person courses. Thus, through investigation of

background environmental factors, individuals may be identified as high-risk of dropping out of courses.

In other research that places emphasis on the relationship between student engagement and retention in online and in-person college courses, Tight (2020) conceptually identified student retention and student engagement as different approaches to understanding the same issue in higher education. Noting an identifiable shift in existing research from improving retention to improving student engagement in higher education, Tight identified a parallel with changes to perceived responsibility associated with higher education experiences. They point out that financial burdens for education have swung inextricably towards the individual and away from governments, raising tuitions. Furthermore, institutions have responded to this financial tightening by acting more as market actors rather than institutions for the public good. Universities increasingly rely on student tuition fees to meet their budgets, and thus must respond to the demands of their clients. Tight concluded that researching the self-reported experiences of a diverse array of college students through holistic approaches is the most effective means of understanding the complexities of student retention and student engagement in higher education. The subsection that follows details the nature and causes of retention disparities in online college courses.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the challenges and complexities of online education, particularly in terms of curriculum design, teacher training, and student retention. The chaotic implementation of online teaching during the pandemic, coupled with the lack of training programs for teachers, has led to a decline in education efficacy. However, criticisms of online education should not solely be attributed to the medium itself, but rather the circumstances surrounding its sudden adoption and the associated switching costs for both

teachers and students. Efforts to incorporate online pedagogy and curriculum-specific courses into teacher training programs are ongoing, aiming to address teachers' discomfort with technology and enhance their abilities in online teaching. Course designs and learning platforms, such as LMSs play a significant role in shaping students' learning experiences and outcomes. While LMSs can contribute to improved student retention, their efficacy may vary, and effective implementation is crucial. Teacher attitudes and comfort with technology also influence their perceptions and performance in online education. However, more research is needed to provide empirical evidence of the effectiveness of these perceptions. The literature acknowledges the differences between online and traditional teaching but also highlights the similarities and the potential advantages of both approaches. Factors such as student engagement, support, collaboration, and individual characteristics play a significant role in student retention and success in both online and in-person courses. Further research is necessary to explore the impact of demographics and student engagement on retention disparities in online learning environments. Overall, a comprehensive and holistic approach is needed to understand the complexities of student retention and engagement in higher education, considering the diverse experiences and needs of college students.

Retention Disparities in Online Classes

While retention issues are prevalent among many student populations, notable disparities in online course retention are also evident in existing literature. Just as Tight (2020) framed college student retention as an issue of engagement, James (2020) and Athens (2018) observed low retention in online college courses as a manifestation of a lack of student persistence in online courses. While an increasing number of college students have enrolled in online courses

in recent years, there is less persistence among many nontraditional students enrolled in online courses in comparison to nontraditional students enrolled in traditional in-person courses.

In another study that was aimed at addressing disparities in online college student retention, Graham and Manion (2019) emphasized the detrimental effects of differences between online learners' perceptions and learning experiences in comparison to their educators' perceptions of students' needs on student retention in online courses. Graham and Manion (2019) specifically sought to understand online course best practices and barriers that prevent students from achieving favorable outcomes in online classes at the college level. The researchers selected this focus to improve retention and other student outcomes in online college courses by enhancing faculty education. Over 240 self-reported survey responses from college students enrolled in online courses to gain insight into their online learning experiences were collected. The researchers used participants' responses to evaluate "all aspects of online learning, from registration and start up, to interaction with peers and faculty, to how they would compare their online learning to a traditional classroom experience" (Graham & Manion, 2019, p. 5). Upon analyzing participants' responses, the researchers determined multiple pathways to improvements in the delivery of online college courses to enhance learning outcomes. The researchers concluded by highlighting how the application of their results in online college courses could contribute to increased student retention and improved completion rates, regardless of students' characteristics. Like James (2020) study, Graham and Manion's research highlights the role of expectations and students' experiences in online student retention at the college level.

Baker et al. (2022) findings further reinforce the notion that differences in college students' experiences in online courses can shape retention rates and discrepancies. Specifically, Baker et al.'s findings highlighted the influence of racial and gender bias on the learning

experiences and interactions of online college students, thus potentially shaping their decisions to continue online enrollment or drop out. The subsection that follows provides additional discussion of retention disparities associated with nontraditional minority students enrolled in online college courses.

Retention of Non-traditional Minority Students

Nontraditional minority students' experiences in online courses are shaped by additional factors and common characteristics that distinguish their experiences from other student populations (Bosch et al., 2018; James, 2020). As James (2020) noted, "Nontraditional students experience unique challenges to academic development stemming from problems at home, low-socioeconomic status, minimal off-campus support, and isolating discourse of academia" (p. 20). Due to the multitude of factors that shape the experiences of nontraditional minority students in online courses, understanding the causes of retention disparities that result from differences in students' experiences in online courses is complex. These students' unique challenges and circumstances necessitate a comprehensive examination of the underlying causes.

Similar to James' (2020) framing of online college student retention as a persistence issue, Sapp (2021) framed online student retention among nontraditional minority students as a perseverance issue. The focus of Sapp's (2021) quantitative quasi-experimental research was to investigate potential between-group differences in grit as a measure of motivation to persevere, among nontraditional-age Black college students enrolled in online courses. The study was guided by a theoretical framework that consisted of the grit motivational factor model and life-span development theory. Upon collecting online survey responses from 138 Black nontraditional-age college students enrolled in online courses, responses were compared to participants' demographic information and Short Grit-S Survey responses, which were an

operationalized measure of the perseverance required to achieve long-term goals when confronted with challenges and barriers. Analysis of the data was conducted using a two-by-two factorial ANOVA analysis process, which revealed significant gender and age differences in perseverance scores.

Namely, the Sapp (2021) determined “that male and younger students scored significantly higher than the comparison groups on the Grit-S Scale, but there was no significant interaction” (p. 42). The researcher noted that this finding was not consistent with gender disparities in retention among Black college students as indicated by education data. However, the findings reinforced the notion that factors other than gender and age may be more influential in terms of online student outcomes. Sapp concluded by suggesting the findings be used to facilitate positive social change in college settings and learning environments by guiding the provision of individualized support to non-traditional minority students enrolled in online courses, including support that addresses the role of gender and age-related differences in motivation. These findings further reinforce the complexity of relationships between factors that shape the retention of nontraditional minority college students enrolled in online classes.

The complexity of the relationship between retention and nontraditional minority student characteristics in online college courses becomes even more complicated at the national level, as disparities in online student retention vary considerably between institutions (Hoey, 2020). Some types of higher education institutions, such as private nonprofit Christian colleges, struggle to recruit racially diverse students. Thus, differences in degree completion based on race are particularly exaggerated in these institutions, as the already low number of racially diverse student recruits may dwindle further due to retention issues. Hoey’s findings suggest that colleges offering a higher level of hybrid and online programs attract more racially diverse

students than colleges with limited online learning options. Despite Hoey's assertion that "The addition of online courses and fully online programs may provide an opportunity for private nonprofit Christian colleges to close the educational attainment achievement gap between White and minority students" (p. 21), this conclusion and assertion conflicts, to some extent, with a larger body of evidence suggesting that nontraditional students and racial minority students are disproportionately likely to drop out of online college courses (Athens, 2018).

The relationship between student demographic factors and factors that shape online student retention in efforts to address retention disparities remains a wide topic of study (Paulsen & McCormick, 2020; Sapp, 2021), but most such studies only provide evidence of correlations between demographic variables and student outcomes. To understand differences in online college students' outcomes, another study logged behavioral patterns associated with introductory STEM coursework completed by 470 college students in an online learning environment (Bosch et al., 2018). Demographic variables were compared to the interaction logs through cross-validated data mining, which revealed distinctive behavioral differences in how students interacted with online course content based on their demographics. Analysis showed that first-generation students made more quiz attempts, non-white students interacted more during night hours (8pm-8am), female students submitted quizzes earlier, and non-traditional students accessed discussion forums less than their peers.

These findings led Bosch et al. (2018) to conclude that understanding online student behavior, particularly within the first two weeks of online courses, provides insight into which students are more likely to succeed and persevere academically. Bosch et al.'s findings further highlight how many studies aimed at producing solutions to retention disparities in online courses can fail to provide meaningful insight into the phenomenon of low retention among

nontraditional minority students by ignoring the influence of variables that mediate or explain the relationship between demographic factors and online course outcomes. In considering existing research on online student retention, the multitude of factors that shape students' experiences simultaneously should be acknowledged (Moore & Rutledge, 2018; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020). In doing so, the phenomenon of low student retention can be understood and addressed meaningfully (James, 2020).

Summary

In summation, the problem this research is intended to address is that distance education students are commonly not provided the same level of collaboration or assistance that on-campus learners have access to (Baker & Moyer, 2019; Khan & Gogos, 2013). The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study will be to understand the impact of inclusion in retention for nontraditional students taking global learning classes (distance education) at XYZ Community College in the southeastern the United States. The framework selected to guide this study centers on the concepts of school inclusion and exclusion as defined in Rapp and Corral-Granados' (2021) research and Tinto's Model (1975).

Foundationally, the concepts of inclusion and exclusion are rooted in the principles of social constructivism, social systems theory, and the theory of institutionalism, thus representing a holistic approach to understanding how various factors and mechanisms facilitate inclusion and exclusion in educational institutions and systems at different levels. Existing research presents multiple conceptualizations of inclusion and exclusion in educational environments, with a limited number of existing publications including references to inclusion and exclusion as representations of students' ability to access online higher education. Students in online courses and other learning environments do not experience inclusion and exclusion in the same ways, or

to the same extent. Rather, students who are underrepresented minorities in the context of a particular online learning environment and some other student subpopulations are disproportionately likely to experience exclusion in comparison to their peers.

Retention issues are prevalent among many student populations. While student retention is a complex issue, online courses introduce additional factors that can influence persistence and success. However, notable disparities in online course retention have also been identified in existing research based on students' characteristics and demographics. The influences of course expectations and students' experiences as factors that shape online student retention are particularly relevant at the college level.

Additional factors and common characteristics distinguish the experiences of nontraditional minority students from the experiences of other student populations. A myriad of factors can influence the experiences of nontraditional minority students in online courses, thus making understanding the causes of retention disparities in online courses a complex undertaking.

This study seeks to narrow several gaps in the existing literature on education, discrimination, technology, and inequality. While there is a robust literature on the empirical outcomes of online learning, minority participation, and educational outcomes, there are few approaches that measure individual responses to online learning. The lived experiences of minority students at XYZ Community College present a valuable resource for understanding the online classroom-inclusion nexus. Given the rapid expansion of online learning, as well as continued concerns about minority participation, this paper seeks to provide a contribution to the wider literature.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the impact of inclusion in retention for nontraditional students taking global learning classes (distance education) at XYZ Community College in the southeastern the United States. This was accomplished through semi structured interviews with nontraditional minority students, journal prompts, and questionnaires. These insights into social inclusion are useful for devising strategies to improve retention of nontraditional minority students taking global learning classes. This chapter contain several subsections research design, research question and sub-questions, setting, participants, procedures, the researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and a summary.

Research Design

The research design that was used in this study employed the qualitative research method, specifically utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological design (Churchill, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mihalache, 2019). The qualitative research method assisted in identifying explanations as to how social inclusion could be utilized as a retention tool for nontraditional minority students at XYZ community college. Qualitative research design required the researcher to collect and analyze non-numerical data with the aim of understanding experiences, concepts, and personal opinions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative research design involved various data collection approaches. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher broad prerogatives in identifying and interpreting specific thematic patterns that were difficult to quantify under a quantitative approach. Furthermore, it permitted the researcher to take initiative and delve deeper into themes and ideas on an ad hoc basis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Secondary

research was conducted through the collection of data that was in existence and had been recorded and stored in the form of video recordings, texts, audio, and images. Furthermore, the qualitative method was appropriate because the study's findings were collected in written form (Johnson et al., 2020; Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Through evaluating minority student experiences in the classroom, one could extrapolate those experiences into relevant themes and devise strategies to ameliorate the deleterious effects of exclusion among minority students.

Phenomenology qualitative research design was founded by Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl in the 20th century. Heidegger's original observations have been expanded over the decades, including contributions from Man van Manen (2014), Hans George Gadamer (1992), and Poul Ricouer (1991). A hermeneutic approach was appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, the process of inclusion and exclusion was a fundamentally social process and as such could not be wholly separated from social interpretations of individual interactions. Indeed, the process of exclusion often stemmed not from intentionally explicit actions taken by the in-group, but rather from the interpretation of those actions by the ostensibly excluded party. Second, the nature of data collection necessitated a hermeneutic approach. Data collection in this study was done through interviews with individuals, rather than through direct observation. The interview data were necessarily filtered through the interpretive lens of individual subjects, and thus not an empirical set of data.

Phenomenological research is based on the identification of occurrences and the characteristics of the identified events (Churchill, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mihalache, 2019). Phenomenological research is deeply rooted in philosophy, education, and psychology. This research method is aimed at collecting the most basic forms of data and information. As a result, it ensures that data collected, and conclusions made are credible and unbiased.

Research Questions

This research aimed to investigate the experiences of nontraditional minority students at XYZ Community College. The research questions were designed to investigate this phenomenon through hermeneutic investigation. They addressed the issue most broadly as well as focusing on inclusion, treatment from administrators, and the institution itself. The research questions were as follows:

Central Research Question

What were the experiences of the nontraditional minority students at XYZ Community College taking online courses regarding social inclusion?

Sub-Question One

What were the experiences of nontraditional minority students regarding inclusion at XYZ Community College?

Sub-Question Two

How did nontraditional minority students experience the way they were treated by administrators compared to other non-minority students?

Sub-Question Three

What actions could local community colleges take to accommodate and retain nontraditional students taking global classes?

Setting and Participants

This research focused on nontraditional minority students at XYZ Community College. This section discussed the setting and participants. It described the school and its demographics as well as data collection sites. Furthermore, inclusion criteria and sample sizes were discussed.

Setting

The setting for this investigation was XYZ Community College in the American Southeast. The college had 16 campuses and distance education teaching academic offerings. The campuses were selected due to the diverse programs and student populations. During the 2022 school year, the campus enrolled approximately 57,230 students in associates and technical programs. Of those 57,230 students, more than 30% had not taken any distance education before enrolling at the college. The distance education classes had an average of 25 students per class, and they comprised students from multiple backgrounds, cultures, and ethnic groups.

The data collection took place at two different sites, depending on the convenience of the students. The primary location was a public space on or nearby campus. The preference was for face-to-face meetings, as this in-person data collection allowed for the easy reading of expression and establishing pathos with the subject (Bryman, 2016). However, given the online nature of classes, students may have been unable or unwilling to travel to campus. Should travel and time demands have been overly burdensome, a Teams call was a secondary mode of data collection.

Participants

For this investigation, the potential participants in this study were students in their first or second year at the institution. The participants were nontraditional groups from diverse backgrounds, including African American, Latino, Asian, and Native American students, and they must have been or had taken distance education classes. This study was primarily concerned with minority groups, and thus a representative sample of nonwhite students was pursued. Additionally, the participants of this research were randomly selected upon meeting the study's requirements. The participants included both female and male students ages 18 to 50 years old. The total number of participants was 10-12, of which 6-6 were female and 4-6 were male.

Throughout the enlistment phase for this research, it was deemed that some contributors may choose to be discharged from the research; thus, a secondary group of scholars remained on call to gather the 12- to 15-participant obligation required for the investigation.

Researcher Positionality

This research took its motivation from social constructivism as its interpretive framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Knapp, 2019; Knoblauch, 2019; Pfadenhaueris, 2019). Various community colleges in the USA also did not provide clear paths to include minority students in their systems. Therefore, nontraditional minority students were forced to adhere to community college guidelines aligned against the interests of traditional minority students. In most instances, these guidelines and regulations seemed to undermine the interests of nontraditional minority students. Accordingly, the college's population was divided into groups based on whether their constituents were a social majority or minority. Hence, nontraditional minority students could not acquire sufficient knowledge regarding the social issues of their host countries or colleges.

Interpretive Framework

This study used the interpretive framework of social constructivism. The social constructivism framework identified that humans acquired knowledge from their interactions with other people. Aside from learning through lectures, students from other regions of the world could acquire knowledge through their interactions with traditional majority learners. Therefore, it was vital that community colleges design approaches to ensure that nontraditional minority students would be retained by being socially included in the aspects of running the college or university (Cherner, 2020; Lombardo & Kantola, 2021; Ryttilä, 2021). It was believed that the social inclusion of nontraditional minority students in local community college could and would

play an essential role in attracting and retaining more students. Previous research had already asserted that increased.

Multiculturalism and diversity improved belonging and academic outcomes in various environments (Celeste et al., 2019; Plaut et al., 2018). Correspondingly, the aim of ensuring diversity and inclusion by universities was achieved. Conversely, the social inclusion of nontraditional minority students in community colleges was given first-hand attention. Hence, social equality was established through the practice of the social inclusion of nontraditional minority students in the community college.

Philosophical Assumptions

My position was that the lack of social inclusion of nontraditional students attending XYZ Community College would cause inequality in society. The source of the lack of retention of these students in community college was based on three philosophical assumptions. The philosophical assumptions in this research included ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions (Almasri & McDonald, 2021; Kamal, 2019; Opfer et al., 2021).

Ontological Assumption

My ontological assumption was that every individual is created equally, despite his or her skin color or place of origin. Genesis 1:26 reads: “And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Genesis 1:26). God created every being in His likeness and image; therefore, institution-designed systems should provide everybody with equal opportunities and include everyone in society equally. In this case, the administration of community colleges should have ensured that they developed approaches that would ensure that they accommodated nontraditional minority students in all aspects because they were not lesser beings. Therefore, this study’s arguments were based on the ontological

assumption that God created every individual equally; therefore, social inclusion in higher learning institutions should be embraced (Almasri & McDonald, 2021; Kamal, 2019; Opfer et al., 2021;).

Epistemological Assumption

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), epistemological assumptions were intimately related to what was investigated and the investigator. The epistemological assumption of this study was that social inclusion played an important role in ensuring that equality was achieved in society (Almasri & McDonald, 2021; Kamal, 2019; Opfer et al., 2021). Studies had demonstrated that nontraditional minority students did not receive equal opportunities in colleges. This was because of the social constructs of the majority and the minority classes. The majority social class treated individuals perceived to belong to a low or minority class differently. The interactions between individuals of the two categories were made impossible due to majority groups' discrimination and segregation of minority groups. Social exclusion was practiced in all dimensions of society. Various studies had depicted that the lack of minority groups' social inclusion was a common occurrence, and the rules and guidelines set in society were designed by and for the majority groups in society (Fairlie et al., 2020; Horowitz, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2020). Additionally, there was little or no visibility of members from minority groups; hence, the lack of social inclusion in institutions was a social issue (Sethi & Scales, 2020).

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption of this study was that inclusion should be part of any society (Almasri & McDonald, 2021; Kamal, 2019; Opfer et al., 2021). A harmonious society comprised individuals interacting equally and individually who contributed to the community. The lack of

social inclusion led to inequality in all aspects of life, including unequal development, unequal distribution of resources and wealth, and unequal education. The dynamics of a society might not have been able to bring out the aspect of the total inclusion of all members. However, institutions like local community colleges should have been at the forefront of ensuring that nontraditional minority individuals were retained in society to attain equality and do away with discrimination while achieving diversity. In that case, it was a moral issue that local institutions of higher learning ensured that minority students from diverse parts of the globe were included in various aspects of the college.

Researcher's Role

My role in this research was to act as a medium of information regarding the social inclusion of minority groups from other parts of the world. The information that I brought forth resulted from the data collected from the participants in the study. I had no connection with XYZ Community College's academic department or conflict of interest. Because the conclusions of this paper derived from data collected directly from the participants, there was little threat of bias for the researcher, although the interrogation and identification of biases were critical in the evaluative process. Furthermore, the data from the participants provided educational, inclusionary, and classroom experiences in the host community college. Due to my positionality as a researcher, it was incumbent on me to act as a facilitator and driver of the interviewer, drawing out critical threads regarding the research questions.

Procedures

The procedure I followed was to obtain permission from the Institutional Review Board, the institution where the investigation was conducted (the IRB notified the Chief Academic Officer if needed), and the subjects of this study. In addition, the process of conducting

individual interviews and questionnaires was discussed in the procedures section (Epp & Otnes, 2021; Strandenaes et al., 201; Tayebi Abolhasani, 2019)

Permissions

An email addressing the IRB at the community college where the research was conducted was written seeking its permission. Upon the approval and subsequent approval from Liberty University's IRB, conducting the study on the school compound and involving the selected students as participants commenced. To be allowed to conduct the research study, the IRB form was sought from the IRB for approval. Finally, emails were sent to selected subjects seeking to understand their commitment to participating in the study. Emails sent to these individuals included their roles and responsibilities during the research and a \$20 compensation announcement for their time.

Recruitment Plan

The prepositive sample size of this study constituted 10-15 nontraditional, nonwhite students of color. The sample size was derived from 1000+ nontraditional students at the selected local community colleges. 5-6 of the participants were female, while 4-6 participants were male. Given these parameters, the selection criteria were prepositive to ensure representative candidates were selected. The selection process began with contacting the college students using campus emails. The instructors and/or SSS Director and/or CODE director then distributed information requesting participants in the study. These students were then vetted for representativeness, ensuring a balanced sample. If the sample proved to be insufficiently balanced, a snowballing method may have been employed to further recruit candidates. During the entire process, information was collected following the consent of the participants.

Data Collection Plan

The topic under investigation required first-hand information from the participants. Data was collected using individual semi-structured team interviews, journal prompts, and questionnaires. The order of the data collection began with the interviews being conducted before the questionnaires to obtain personal experiences that had not been influenced or biased by other participants (Baillie, 2019; Natow, 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). The questionnaires were conducted to help identify if there were any problems faced by non-traditional minority students due to a lack of social inclusion at local community college and the possible policies that could be put in place by the college administrations to support social inclusion and thus retain non-traditional students taking global classes. The journal prompts were used throughout the interviews and review of the questionnaires to make note of any significant thoughts about the information from the researcher's perspective. The data was then analyzed using MaxQDA software (Marjaei et al., 2019; Oswald, 2019).

Individual Interviews (Data Collection Approach #1)

The individual interviews ensured that both relevant and sufficient information was obtained from the participants. The interpretive framework of the study was social constructivism, so the interviews focused on the social basis of human interaction. Each interview lasted for around 60 minutes, and they were conducted using Microsoft Teams. The interviews were recorded digitally through teams. The semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions (Baillie, 2019; Natow, 2020; Taylor et al., 2021).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself.
2. Please describe your educational background and career goals.

3. Please describe your experience taking online courses. SQ1
4. What types of activities were or were included in the online classes to create an inclusive class environment? SQ1
5. How did your experience in online classes and interaction with the administration make you feel included in the campus community? SQ2
6. To what extent did you find these activities effective at fostering inclusion? SQ1
7. How well did you think XYZ Community College fostered diversity and inclusion during your tenure as an online learner? Why? SQ2
8. Describe which activities could have been integrated into the classes to create more inclusion. SQ3
9. What else would you have liked to see in future classes to make you feel more included? SQ3

Which, if any, online communities made you feel excluded? SQ3

The questions included in the individual interviews were developed based on the research questions that were developed and Rapp and Corral-Granado's (2021) definition of exclusion in education, which was rooted in social systems theory. The questions were formulated to elicit responses from the participants that would assist in understanding inclusivity from their perspectives in online classes.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan # 1

The data analysis plan following direct interviews was an inductive approach comprised mainly of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis sought to make sense of the responses provided by the participants in the study (Mihás, 2019; Younas et al., 2021). The interviews were transcribed and then sent to each participant for member checking. The participants reviewed the

transcribed interviews for accuracy, made any necessary corrections, and sent them back to the researcher. After the transcribed interviews were verified by the participants, coding began. The valuable aspects of the narrations given by respondents were brought together and related both to the experiences of the readers and to the findings of related research. While using this method, large blocks of participants' stories collected through the interviews were split and coded as smaller texts and grouped into selected themes. Narrations by participants were then grouped according to the identified themes, and a common ground for data analysis was set (Meraz et al., 2019; Younas et al., 2021). Creswell and Poth (2018) described horizontalization as a process of going "through the data and highlight[ing] 'significant statements,' sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon" (p. 79). All the contributors' assertions were valued equally, and all monotonous statements and any information that did not relate to the investigation questions were eliminated. Coding took place, which was the method that permitted the investigator to make sense of all the information collected more rationally, and was utilized through data analysis as it was the procedure of classifying data into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018), followed by fine coding. After coding, the next step was the presentation of the data using visual tools and images for comparison purposes. Finally, a report of the comparison findings was written, and the analysis results were documented.

Questionnaires Data Collection Approach #2

In addition to individual interviews, a questionnaire was distributed to all participants as well as candidates who were unable to attend an individual interview session. Questionnaires were distributed digitally and physically at the data collection site, either through email or upon completion of the individual interview. Subjects were given significant time to complete the tasks (1-2 weeks) to ensure sufficient flexibility in their schedules (Bryman, 2016). Digital

questionnaires were returned via email, while physical questionnaires could be returned through post or through scan and photograph digitally.

Questionnaires

As Bryman observed, there were many similarities between questionnaires and individual interviews, yet there were several important differences that made questionnaires a useful addition to the data collection process. First, questionnaires were cheaper, faster, and easier to distribute than individual interviews (Bryman, 2016). Introverted or shy respondents were more likely to respond to questionnaires as they limited the influence of the interviewer on the questions. Those with busy schedules or with dispersed units of time over the day also benefited from a questionnaire. A questionnaire could be started, put on hold, and finished at a later time at the subjects' convenience. This ease ensured a wider and more diverse sample population included in the dataset. Questionnaires had another important advantage over individual interviews. When dealing with sensitive subjects like inclusion and racial bias, questionnaires had been shown to elicit more honest responses from individuals (Torurangeau & Smith, 1996). In addition, Triangulation of data was applied to guarantee that the investigation was completed in a credible, dependable, and valid way (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation was the method of utilizing several approaches to test the rationality of qualitative research through the integration of information from different sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Questionnaire Questions

Note: Inclusion is the process of ensuring that everyone can participate fully in society.

1. Described the social inclusion at this college. RQ1
2. Discussed inclusion in your classes and its relationship to student retention. RQ1

3. Did you feel integrated in this college? Why? RQ2
4. What elements of inclusion or exclusion would have made you likely to leave the program? RQ2
5. Which of the linked themes were truly significant to your completion of your program? RQ2
6. What other recommendations would you have offered to your college to create a more inclusive institution and retain nontraditional minority students taking online classes? RQ3

The first question centered on discovering how the contributors perceived social inclusion at the community college. Question two aimed at characterizing how social inclusion impacted student retention; in addition, it allowed the participants to share their perspective. Finally, questions three and four focused on identifying how the participants truly felt about their motivation to continue at their college because of social inclusion.

Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan

The questionnaire data analysis plan followed the inductive narrative analysis, consistent with the interview data analysis plan (Meraz et al., 2019; Younas et al., 2021). The information gathered from the responses was transcribed whenever they were handwritten. Next, the records and surveys were prepared for the next step, Coding, which is the method that permits the investigator to make sense of all the information collected more rationally, was utilized through data analysis as it is the procedure of classifying data into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The narrations were grouped into themes for analysis. After coding, the next step was the presentation of the data using visual tools and images for comparison purposes. Finally, a report of the comparison findings was written, and the analysis results documented.

Journal Prompt – Data Collection Approach #3

The primary goal was to elicit rich and detailed reflections on the students' lived experiences. Journal prompts served as a means of engaging participants in a thoughtful and introspective process, allowing them to articulate, explore, and deepen their understanding of the phenomenon under investigation

Data Synthesis

All the transcriptions for the participants' interviews, questionnaires, and journal prompts were filtered using the horizontalization process. The transcription was done using Rev software and verified by the researcher. Transcription could be a time-consuming process and using software could be far more efficient than doing it by hand. The themes created during the analysis of the data collected during individual interviews, questionnaires, and journal prompts were brought together for data sets. Subjects were asked for permission for the use and transcription of their data, with full information as to the scope and purpose of their data. The data were stored and protected via password digitally. The software-transcribed interviews were checked for accuracy by the researcher.

To reach conclusions for the research study, the information found in the data sets was synthesized using MAXQDA software (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019; Marjaei et al., 2019; Oswald, 2019). MAXQDA software is a program created for computer-supported qualitative and mixed methods data, text, and interactive program analysis in academic, scientific, and business institutions. Each of the three data sources provided different perspectives on the problem and was utilized accordingly. The highlighting of going further than qualitative research could be noted in the broad characteristics' utility. The basic version of MAXQDA could be utilized for macOS and Windows and deals with tools for the association and analysis of qualitative

information. This comprises text, audio, image, video, and bibliographical folders as well as analysis statistics.

While using MAXQDA software, the datasets were prepared, organized, and explored. Second, categories of the analysis were developed by using the interview and questionnaire questions as a guide. Third, basic coding took place, followed by fine coding as the fourth step. After coding, themes were developed from the coded data. The fifth step was the presentation of the data using visual tools and images for comparison purposes. Finally, a report of the comparison findings was written, and the analysis results documented (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019; Marjaei et al., Oswald, 2019; Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020).

Trustworthiness

Qualitative phenomenological research relied heavily on the interpretation of data and thus had to undergo rigorous reflection on the rigor and reliability of its methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Sloppy or unreflective methods could have produced unreliable results, fundamentally compromising its findings. Thus, researchers had to gauge the trustworthiness of data collection methods as well as the interpretation thereof. This section addressed questions of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to justify the quality of this research (O’Kane et al., 2021; Stenfors et al., 2020).

Credibility

Credibility was the factor used to gauge the truthfulness of the results and the study’s ability to explain reality; it was contingent upon the worth of the evidence collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Each participant was provided with the opportunity to review and approve their transcript for accuracy. The peer-reviewed articles that were presented in Chapter 2 of this dissertation were also a viable way to demonstrate credibility. Results from

individual interviews, Journal Prompts, and questionnaires proved to be feasible, accurately describing the reality behind the use of social inclusion as an instrument of retention of non-traditional minority students (Closa, 2021; Rantakeisu et al., 2021). Moreover, the participants had lived the experience of being studied as they either had taken or were currently taking global learning classes. Data were gathered utilizing three methods: individual interviews, questionnaires, and Journal Prompts. Using these data collection methods, I was able to triangulate observations and reports from the subjects and compare them to other gathered data, confirming the credibility of individual data points. Credibility through validity generated conventional themes that materialized across numerous records gathering approaches through the triangulation of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Member Checking

Member-checking, where participants reviewed their responses, findings, and interpretations of the primary data evaluation and shared if any information was missing (Creswell & Poth, 2018), increased the credibility of the study as the subjects evaluated the researcher's analysis of the information and filled in any disparities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Allowing the subjects to review, correct, and clarify any misinterpretations by the researcher ensured credibility of the data, as well as improved communication between the researcher and subjects. In addition, triangulation of data was applied to guarantee that the investigation was finished in a credible, dependable, and valid way (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation was the method of utilizing several approaches to test the rationality of qualitative research through the integration of information from different sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability

Transferability was defined as evidence that could be utilized in multiple perspectives (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). For this study, the impact of social inclusion on retention was investigated. Retention was a concept that applied to online classrooms across the nation, and the struggles of nontraditional minority students were not confined to XYZ Community College. This research argued that the insights into XYZ Community College, as an accredited institution of higher learning, abided by the rules and standards of higher education in the United States. Thus, the classroom environments were applicable and transferable to other contexts. Accreditation was strongly correlated with retention rates (Andreani et al., 2019; Ortiz & Hallow, 2019). Without accreditation, an institution could not participate in Title 4 funding, which could have a significant negative impact on institutional registrations. Consequently, retention also affected admissions. Additionally, the findings and conclusions of this research could be easily used in other social settings apart from the education context to ensure that diversity and social inclusion were achieved in society (Closa, 2021; Rantakeisu et al., 2021). The findings could also be used to achieve equality in a wide range of communities and countries.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative investigation indicated how accurately the information characterized the interviews, questionnaires, and journal prompts of contributors. Also, dependability demonstrated that the discoveries were reliable and could be duplicated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To accomplish dependability, investigators ensured the investigation process was rational, distinguishable, and undoubtedly recorded (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Reflexivity was imperative as it was the method of the researcher maintaining a journal while the study that comprised internal and external conversation with the participants of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The conclusions made by this research study were reliable and resulted in consistent

outcomes if practiced (Hays & McKibben, 2021; O’Kane et al., 2021). Additionally, the procedures carried out during data collection could be subjected to an inquiry audit, and the findings could be verified; hence, the study’s results were dependable. The research findings achieved Dependability through triangulation.

Confirmability

The findings of the study achieved confirmability through triangulation. Conclusions were derived from the information collected through interviews and questionnaires without bias or interference from the researcher (Vogl et al., 2019; Closa, 2021). In addition, participants reviewed their responses, findings, and interpretations of the primary data evaluation and shared if any information was missing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This procedure increased the confirmability of the study as the contributors evaluated the researcher’s analysis of the information and filled in any disparities (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Successful completion of a research study required the researcher to observe various ethical considerations. For this study, access to the study site was obtained by the IRB submitting a written request to do so and by securing approval from the administration of the selected local community college (Åkerfeldt & Boistrup, 2021; Hasan et al., 2021).

To gain access to the participants, an email was sent to the IRB of the selected institution to seek approval. For record-keeping purposes, a formal letter was written seeking the same; after choosing the participants, emails were sent to them seeking their consent to be part of the study (Hasan et al., 2021; Recker, 2021). The emails also contained a brief overview of the study goals and expectations. Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any point in the process and their data destroyed. Notably, the information in the emails highlighted the role as a

researcher, affirmed the commitment to keep the information provided private and confidential, and explained the process of withdrawing from participation in the study (Åkerfeldt & Boistrup, 2021; Brittain et al., 2020; Recker, 2021). This was done in several ways. First, all field notes taken were safely secured in a locked office when not in the possession of the researcher. Student names were anonymized with pseudonyms and digital records were saved in a password-protected folder on the researcher's computer. These records were fully anonymized to ensure confidentiality of subjects.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the impact of inclusion on retention for nontraditional students taking global learning classes (distance education) at local Community Colleges in the eastern part of the United States, using the social systems theoretical framework derived from the research of Rapp and Corral-Granados, and social integration into the institution Vincent Tinto. The study sample was purposively selected and comprised male and female minority participants in 1st and 2nd year of study. The topic under investigation fell in the category of human social sciences; therefore, the general design research method used was qualitative method. Additionally, the specific research design appropriate for this research was phenomenological hermeneutic research design. This was because this method provided an explanation of the lived narrations and experiences of the participants collected using individual interviews and questionnaires. The interview questions comprised semi-structured questions, allowing the researcher to capture all the appropriate and relevant information to make conclusions. In addition, the 3 data collection strategies allowed for inductive narrative data analysis, which was subsequently analyzed further using MAXQAD software.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of the study was to understand the impact of inclusion on retention for non-traditional students taking global learning classes (distance education) at XYZ Community College in the southeastern United States. The importance of the study was to yield unique empirical insights into the nature of online learning environments and enable community institutions to retain students. A qualitative research method and a hermeneutic phenomenological design were used to conduct the study. The qualitative research method helped in identifying explanations as to how social inclusion could be used as a retention tool for non-traditional minority students at XYZ Community College. The participants in the study were 10 non-traditional students in their first or second year at the institution. Data collection methods included questionnaires and interviews. Data were analyzed through a thematic data analysis approach. The central research question in the study was: How could social inclusion be used as an instrument for retaining non-traditional students at a local community college when taking online classes? Chapter 5 included the interpretation of findings, implications for policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Participants

The participants were a purposeful sample of 10 minority students at XYZ Community College, a local community college in the southeastern United States. Six of the participants were female, and four were male. Six of the participants were Black, two were Hispanic, and two were Asian. Four participants were between the ages of 18 and 19, and the remaining six participants were between the ages of 20 and 49. All the participants were enrolled in different

concentrations of study. Table 1 indicates the demographic characteristics of the individual study participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

	Gender	Age range	Ethnicity	Area of study
Angela	Female	18-19	Black	Early childhood education
Carl	Male	20-29	Hispanic	Non-disclosed
Eve	Female	30-39	Black	Criminal justice
Frank	Male	18-19	Asian	Pre-medicine
Greg	Male	20-29	Black	Engineering
Helen	Female	20-29	Hispanic	Non-disclosed
Jackie	Female	18-19	Asian	Undecided
Muriel	Female	40-49	Black	Paramedic
Susanne	Female	18-19	Black	Computer aided drafting design
Zane	Male	40-49	Black	Computer networking

Results

The data consisted of a verbatim interview transcript, a journal entry, and a questionnaire from each of the 10 participants, for a total of 30 documents. The documents were imported as source files into MAXQDA software for inductive, thematic analysis. In the first step of the analysis, the data was read and reread in full to gain familiarity with its scope. Handwritten notes were made regarding repeated words, phrases, and ideas to serve as a basis for code generation in the next step of the analysis.

In the second step of the analysis, the data in all the source documents was broken down into its smallest meaningful parts. The resulting segments of text each consisted of phrases or groups of consecutive phrases from the participants' responses that expressed a single idea relevant to addressing a research question in this study. As an example of a relevant segment of text, Angela said, "We often use online discussions as part of our homework. These discussions allow us to share our thoughts on the course material. It's a way to engage with peers and seek help or assistance when needed." A total of 115 relevant segments of text were identified across the 30 data sources.

The next step of the analysis involved clustering the relevant segments of text into initial codes. Each segment of text was labeled with a descriptive phrase summarizing its meaning. For example, the text segment quoted from Angela was assigned to a code labeled, *discussion boards contributed to inclusion*. When different text segments expressed similar meanings, they were assigned to the same code. For example, Carl stated, "In my online classes, some assignments encouraged interaction, such as posing questions for discussion. Students were prompted to read chapters, answer questions, and respond to their peers' contributions, fostering a degree of engagement." This text segment from Carl's response was assigned to the same code as the text segment from Angela's response because they had similar meanings. Overall, the 115 relevant text segments were clustered into 23 initial codes. Table 2 indicates the initial codes and how many text segments were assigned to each code from each data source.

Table 2

Initial Codes

Initial code (alphabetized)	<i>n</i> of text segments assigned from:		
	Inter-views	Journals	Questionnaires
Administration is responsive to requests for help	4	1	
Availability of help upon request contributed to retention		5	
Creating Opportunities for Diversity in Education group	5		4
Did not feel included	6		
Discussion boards contributed to inclusion	8		
Feedback from professors contributed to inclusion	4	6	
Feeling included at the college	9	3	9
Flexibility of online classes contributed to inclusion	1	2	
Fostered diversity and inclusion well	4		
Highlighting current options			1
Hiring more minority instructors and administrators	1		1
Inclusion promoted retention		1	9
Instructional videos contributed to inclusion	2		
More communication with classmates	7		
More direction for students	1		
More online meetings			1
More online meetings would enhance inclusion	4		
Multicultural Center contributed to inclusion	1		2
No activities promoting inclusion	1		
Positive experiences of inclusion		1	7
Purposeful inclusion of diverse perspectives	3		1
Website to facilitate social networking			1
Workshops contributed to retention		2	

Related initial codes were then clustered to form a smaller number of broader categories that would indicate the major, emergent findings in this study. Table 3 indicates how the related initial codes were clustered to form preliminary themes.

Table 3

Clustering of Related Initial Codes to Form Preliminary Themes

Preliminary theme Initial code grouped to form theme	<i>n</i> of text segments assigned from:		
	Inter-views	Journals	Questionnaires
Preliminary theme 1: Codes related to remote learning factors that contributed to inclusion	14	9	7
Discrepant data - No activities promoting inclusion			
Discussion boards contributed to inclusion			
Feedback from professors contributed to inclusion			
Flexibility of online classes contributed to inclusion			
Positive experiences of inclusion			
Preliminary theme 2: Codes related to effect of remote learning inclusion on retention	21	4	18
Discrepant data - Did not feel included			
Feeling included at the college			
Fostered diversity and inclusion well			
Inclusion promoted retention			
Instructional videos contributed to inclusion			
Preliminary theme 3: Codes related to administration effects on inclusion and retention	10	8	6
Administration is responsive to requests for help			
Availability of help upon request contributed to retention			

Preliminary theme	<i>n</i> of text segments assigned from:		
	Inter-views	Journals	Questionnaires
Initial code grouped to form theme			
Creating Opportunities for Diversity in Education group			
Multicultural Center contributed to inclusion			
Workshops contributed to retention			
Preliminary theme 4: Codes related to recommended changes to promote retention	15		5
Highlighting current options			
Hiring more minority instructors and administrators			
More communication with classmates			
More direction for students			
More online meetings would enhance inclusion			
Purposeful inclusion of diverse perspectives			
Website to facilitate social networking			

The preliminary themes were assigned finalized names by reviewing the data assigned to them and assessing its meaning in relation to the research question each theme addressed. Table 4 indicates the finalized name given to each preliminary theme after an assessment of the meaning of its data.

Table 4

Finalized Naming of Preliminary Themes

Preliminary theme label	Finalized theme name
Remote learning factors that contributed to inclusion	→ Theme 1: Feedback from professors and discussion boards contributed to inclusion.
Effect of remote learning inclusion on retention	→ Theme 2: Inclusion in classes promoted retention

Administration effects on inclusion and retention	→	Theme 3: Administration-led inclusion initiatives increased inclusion and retention.
Recommended changes to promote retention	→	Theme 4: Increased inclusion efforts in remote learning can promote retention.

Research Question Responses

The central research question in this study was: How can social inclusion be used as an instrument of retaining nontraditional students at a local community college when taking online classes? This question was addressed by addressing the three sub-questions that were derived from it. This presentation is organized by research sub-question. Table 5 is a preliminary overview of how the emergent themes in this study are presented to address the research questions.

Sub-question One

What are the experiences of nontraditional minority students regarding inclusion at XYZ Community College? Two themes emerged during data analysis to address this question, as follows: (Theme 1) feedback from professors and discussion boards contributed to inclusion, and (Theme 2) inclusion promoted retention. The following sections are presentations of these themes.

Theme 1: Feedback from Professors and Discussion Boards Contributed to Inclusion

All 10 participants contributed to this theme through their interviews, their journals, or their questionnaires. The data associated with this theme indicated characteristics of distance education that the participants regarded as contributing to their inclusion. Most of the participants indicated that feedback from their professors, when it was timely, contributed to their sense of inclusion. Most participants also indicated that their participation with their

classmates in discussion boards contributed to a sense of inclusion. Overall, nine of the participants reported that they felt included in their online classes at least some of the time. Only one participant provided discrepant data indicating that she had no experience of inclusion in her distance learning classes. The participants described their experiences of inclusion as highly positive.

Four participants in their interviews and six participants in their journals described timely feedback from professors as contributing to their experience of inclusion. In an interview response, Angela said, “I’ve had positive experiences with the faculty and staff. They are responsive to emails and even offer office hours on platforms like Teams for further assistance. This has made me feel supported and included.” For Angela, then, the responsiveness of faculty and staff contributed to inclusion. Zane agreed, saying in an interview response, “The immediate response from teachers contributes to this [inclusion]. The interactions with faculty play a crucial role in making me feel included. Their responsiveness contributes significantly to the overall effectiveness.” Zane therefore also cited faculty responsiveness as contributing substantially to inclusion. Greg wrote in a journal response about factors that contributed to inclusion, “There were loads of support from the faculty and staff who helped with any question I had and were willing to help with any difficulties,” thereby agreeing with Angela and Zane that faculty responsiveness contributed to inclusion. In answering the journal prompt about factors that contributed to inclusion, Susanne wrote, “Speaking to my online professor is going to benefit me because I chose to get help rather than to struggle. I’m using what I can to stay with the class and not be overwhelmed by confusion or miscommunication.” Thus, Susanne also regarded the responsiveness of faculty as contributing to inclusion.

Six participants indicated in their interview responses that their participation in discussion boards contributed to their sense of inclusion. Angela said in her interview response that discussion boards contributed to her inclusion because, “We often use online discussions as part of our homework. These discussions allow us to share our thoughts on the course material. It's a way to engage with peers and seek help or assistance when needed.” Thus, discussion boards enabled Angela to engage with classmates and professors, thereby contributing to her inclusion. Carl said in an interview response, “In my online classes, some assignments encouraged interaction, such as posing questions for discussion. Students were prompted to read chapters, answer questions, and respond to their peers' contributions, fostering a degree of engagement.” Like Angela, Carl cited the opportunity to engage with classmates as contributing to inclusion. It should be noted, however, that Carl regarded this level of engagement with peers as superficial: “The class had a diverse composition, particularly with a few Hispanic students, but the interaction between different demographics was limited. Diversity existed, but genuine inclusion seemed somewhat lacking.” Frank said in an interview response, “Sometimes, there were optional discussion posts . . . Occasionally, the discussion posts with students were somewhat effective.” However, it may be noted that Frank added, “Overall, there were limited social interactions and inclusion options . . . there weren't many activities focused on fostering inclusion,” expressing a perception of limited inclusion. Helen said in an interview response, “In some of my online classes, activities included discussions with other students. We talked about our likes and dislikes and shared our opinions,” thereby contributing to inclusion. Jackie addressed the interview question of what factors contributed to inclusion by answering, “Discussion boards, where people introduced themselves online. I feel included because I

interact with my peers,” thus expressing agreement with other participants who cited discussion boards as fostering inclusion.

Only one participant provided discrepant data indicating a lack of any activities that fostered inclusion in her online classes. Eve said of her distance learning experiences, “Specific activities fostering interaction were lacking.” Eve did not mention whether her classes included significant interaction with peers through discussion boards. In her journal responses, Eve noted that feedback from faculty was not thorough, and that this lack of responsiveness contributed to a sense of exclusion (“There's minimal feedback on assignments”; “The lack of detailed explanations and guidance creates a sense of isolation”). However, Eve reported that she felt integrated into the community at XYZ College because of administration-led initiatives to promote inclusion, as discussed under Theme 3 in this chapter.

The participants who felt included in their online classes described those experiences of inclusion as positive. Susanne wrote in a representative questionnaire response,

For me, it has been a lovely surprise to see so many different people who all have different experiences and lives. I find it so fascinating to meet people I would have never [have met] if going to a university with people who would have been in a similar demographic, and I'm happy for the environment, which is so inviting and welcoming for so many different people.

Thus, Susanne indicated that she enjoyed the diversity and inclusion at XYZ College. Eve, who provided discrepant data indicating a lack of inclusion efforts in her online classes, wrote in a questionnaire response that her overall experience of inclusion at the college was positive:

This college makes it very clear that everyone has a chance. I do believe in the past it was a bit racist, but within the last year plenty of people have overextended themselves to me.

They have taught me things in ways that I was unable to understand in the past with other faculty . . . So, for this time I have not been belittled or told what I wasn't able to accomplish. In the past, I was. This time, I am not, and I honestly feel like I have already walked across the stage.

Eve therefore indicated that she not only felt included, but that she felt empowered to succeed in college and earn her degree. Greg wrote in a questionnaire response of his overall experience of inclusion at XYZ College that it was also highly positive:

The instructors are and have been very understanding that their students are of different age groups and backgrounds. The instructors make a conscious effort in the beginning of classes to become familiar with each student and discuss any boundaries that they may have, whether in learning or in general conversation.

Thus, Greg indicated that he and other students felt included because the professors took the time to get to know them and their preferences and boundaries. The following theme addresses the effect of participants' positive experiences of inclusion on retention.

Theme 2: Inclusion Promoted Retention

The participants contributed to this theme through their interview, journal, and questionnaire responses. Data associated with the previous theme indicated whether and how the participants experienced inclusion in their online classes, and the positive quality of their experience of inclusion. Data associated with the present theme indicated that, overall, most participants felt included at the community college, and that the participants' overall experiences of inclusion contributed to their retention.

As discussed under Theme 1, participants such as Carl and Frank felt minimally included in their online classes, and Eve did not feel at all included in her online classes. However, nine

out of 10 participants reported that they felt included overall at XYZ Community College. Eve's response indicating her overall sense of inclusion at the college was quoted under Theme 1.

Frank, who felt limited inclusion in his classes, wrote in a questionnaire response,

After I joined CODE [the Creating Opportunities for Diversity in Education group], I definitely feel integrated in this college. I look forward to coming here every single day.

The environment and the people in the hub are so amazing. It is a very good place for me to study and complete my work, while also interacting and building relationships.

Thus, the administration-led inclusion initiative, CODE, had helped Frank to feel included. Like Frank, Jackie said, "The Creating Opportunities for Diversity in Education (CODE) center makes me feel accepted and valued." Jackie added of CODE in a journal response, "It made me realize that I am not alone in this journey." Greg said, "I feel integrated in this college and for many reasons. The main reason I would say I feel integrated is the many infrastructures in place to ensure success," with "infrastructures" including CODE, the Multicultural Center, and faculty responsiveness. Muriel said in an interview response, "I feel included," and Susanne also said in an interview response, "I already feel included." Angela wrote in her questionnaire response, "I feel included in this college because they always reach out to make sure that I feel included. They always have different activities that I can participate in that shows that they want all their students to feel integrated," citing inclusion efforts on behalf of the college as instrumental to her sense of inclusion. Zane said in an interview response, "I already feel included . . . I feel genuinely welcome both online and on campus."

Carl provided discrepant data indicating that he did not feel included overall at the college. He said: "Personally, I don't feel integrated into the college because I've only taken classes for a single semester, and I've spent more time at my other college before transferring

here.” Thus, Carl indicated that he lacked a sense of inclusion because he was new to the school. However, Carl reported that he experienced the opportunity to work independently as a benefit: “Online classes have the benefit of being on your own time and place, and keeping you in your own little bubble, which is something I like, as I work best independently.” Carl added, “Exclusion to me takes the form of ostracization. If people went out of their way to ostracize or criticize me based on my race and identity, that would make me more likely to leave the program.” Thus, Carl indicated that his retention at XYZ College would only be threatened if he felt singled out because of his ethnicity.

The nine participants who felt included reported that their sense of inclusion contributed to their retention at XYZ College. Asked on the questionnaire about the relationship between inclusion in her classes and student retention, Angela answered, “In my classes, we did class introductions to make sure everyone knew everyone. This also made it so that everyone would refer to everyone how they wished to be referred as,” (i.e., using the correct pronouns). Angela therefore felt that the inclusion effort of ensuring that everyone’s identity was respected contributed to retention. Eve wrote in a questionnaire response of how inclusion in her classes contributed to student retention,

I have classes with other students that are overcoming the same type of barriers and financial struggles. Not only do we learn together but we support and help to build confidence and encouragement when we are working together. Understanding that we all are first generation students with little to no income, kids, etc. We help encourage and inspire one another. We do it with great pleasure.

Thus, Eve did not find that faculty promoted inclusion effectively in her classes, but she felt that her classmates were inclusive, and that their camaraderie and mutual support contributed to

student retention. Frank wrote in a questionnaire response of the relationship between inclusion and retention, “Inclusion is something that is very important to me. I thrive the most whenever I am in a setting where I feel accepted and included.” Muriel wrote in a questionnaire response of the relationship between inclusion and retention, “It is my responsibility as a student to feel a part of my classes, but the instructors allow a student to speak openly without feeling they are being judged by their fellow peers,” thereby indicating that faculty-led efforts to promote inclusion promoted retention. Susanne answered on the questionnaire, “Because of how inclusive and inviting it is, I don’t think people would want to leave a place like this that tries its hardest to make everyone feel a part of the team,” again indicating that inclusion promoted retention. Thus, most of the participants felt included at XYZ College, and the participants experienced their sense of inclusion as promoting their retention.

Sub-question Two

~~SQ2 was:~~ How do nontraditional minority students experience the way they are treated by administrators compared to other, non-minority students? The theme that emerged during data analysis to address this question was:

Theme 3: Administration-Led Inclusion Initiatives Increased Inclusion and Retention

The participants contributed to this theme through their interview, journal, and questionnaire responses. It was a limitation of the study that this question could not be answered as stated because the participants could not attest to the experiences of “other, non-minority students.” The participants were only able to attest to their own experiences of how they were treated by administrators. The treatment that the participants reported was positive. The participants reported having their inclusion and retention promoted by administration-led initiatives such as the CODE (Creating Opportunities for Diversity in Education) group, the

Multicultural Center (or Hub), and Family Scholar House. Participants also reported that the responsiveness of administrators when they asked for help contributed to their sense of inclusion and their intention to persist until graduation.

Five participants reported having their inclusion and retention promoted by CODE. Greg said in an interview response, “I received support from the administration, mainly through CODE . . . CODE's efforts and the support I received were highly influential in fostering inclusion.” Thus, Greg identified CODE with the administration and referred to it as instrumental in promoting his inclusion. Jackie also said in an interview response, “I feel included because I interact with my peers and am part of Creating Opportunities for Diversity in Education group.” Asked if she felt included, Muriel answered in a questionnaire response, “In CODE I do. This is because there are people around me who make me feel excited to come here every day.” Eve wrote in a questionnaire response,

CODE is also so influential for me [in addition to Family Scholar House]. If it were not for both programs entirely, I wouldn't be in college now. If I had attended without being enrolled in either program, I know for sure I wouldn't be successful.

Thus, Eve associated CODE directly with her retention. Eve also referred to Family Scholar House as contributing to her retention:

CODE and Family Scholar House are two great opportunities I get to participate in here at [XYZ]. They provide several supportive services. They promote healthy influence on creating life goals to help me be successful in college. Some of the services include help with childcare, clothes for job interviews, counseling for mental health and tutoring spaces without judgement, with real people to help. They even provide food at times.

Eve therefore indicated that she received help from CODE and Family Scholar House in meeting her basic needs, and that without these administration-led initiatives, she might not have been successful in college.

Three participants referred to the Multicultural Center as an administration-led initiative that promoted inclusion and retention. Frank, who felt minimal inclusion in online classes, wrote of the Multicultural Center in a questionnaire response,

In the multicultural center, the social inclusion is amazing. As you walk through the hub, you are welcomed by many friendly people who are wanting to converse with you and learn more about you. Whenever there are events occurring, everyone is welcome, and it is always a very good time. Every single person in the hub is amazing, and they all contribute to making each other's day better.

Frank therefore felt included through the administration-led initiative of the Multicultural Center, rather than through faculty-led initiatives such as discussion boards in online classes. Jackie also wrote in a questionnaire response, "I felt more included when working in the Multicultural Center room."

Four participants reported that the administration's responsiveness to their requests for help contributed to their retention. Angela wrote in a journal response, "XYZ provides many different support services for those who might be struggling. Having these services makes me want to continue even when the journey gets hard. I know there is always someone there that is willing to help me," indicating that academic support for struggling students such as workshops and tutoring promoted retention. Zane also wrote in a journal response of how administrative support related to retention, "The support services have directly made the difference in my success. Currently I have a 3.0 GPA. Without support services, that would not be possible,"

indicating that academic support promoted retention. Susanne wrote in a journal response of the administration's overall responsiveness as a factor that promoted retention,

No matter what I need help in, someone is willing to help, like when I didn't have a student ID card or knew what my code was, it was so simple for me to ask and find out, and the people who I talked to were so nice, there was no judgment or callousness, it was just helpful staff, and I'm grateful for that.

Susanne perceived the helpful, responsive, nonjudgmental administrative staff as both an inclusion factor and a retention factor. Thus, participants experienced administration-led initiatives as promoting their inclusion and retention. The following theme indicated additional recommended support for further promoting the retention of minority students.

Sub-question Three

What actions can the local community college take to accommodate and retain nontraditional students taking global classes? The theme that emerged during data analysis to address this question was:

Theme 4: Increased Inclusion Efforts in Remote Learning Can Promote Retention

The participants contributed to this theme through their interview and questionnaire responses. Data associated with this theme indicated participants' recommendations for increasing retention of minority students by increasing inclusion in online learning. Recommendations included facilitating more communication among classmates, holding more online meetings, more purposeful inclusion of diverse perspectives, hiring more minority instructors and administrators, and creating an online platform to facilitate social networking among students.

Five participants recommended increasing inclusion and retention by facilitating more communication among classmates during online learning. Angela recommended in an interview response, “I think more activities that bring the class together, such as introductions and personal stories sharing, would help students connect with their peers and instructors.” Carl recommended in an interview response, “Personally, more opportunities for interaction among students would be beneficial. Whether through structured discussions, group projects, or other collaborative activities, fostering a sense of community would enhance the overall learning experience.” In another interview response, Jackie recommended, “More communication with peers and classmates, asking questions beyond where you're from.”

Four participants suggested more communication with classmates and professors specifically in the form of synchronous online meetings. Frank recommended in an interview response, “Perhaps having mandatory or semi-mandatory group discussions every eight weeks where the entire class works together on assignments. This could help build relationships and increase inclusion.” In another interview response, Helen suggested, “I believe incorporating class discussions and video class meetings would be beneficial in enhancing inclusion in online courses.” Susanne recommended in an interview response, “More online meetings, whether one-on-one or in small groups, would encourage students to ask questions and receive feedback, like the interaction in a traditional classroom.”

Three participants recommended a more purposeful inclusion of diverse perspectives during online learning. Carl suggested in a questionnaire response, “It’s hard for minority people to relate when they’re most times the only one of their kind in their classes. Being a little welcoming and celebrating other cultures is a good start, not seeing us as ‘other,’ or ‘exotic.’” In an interview response, Eve recommended inclusion of more diverse scholarship:

“Acknowledging scholarships related to historical events, races, backgrounds, and cultures could promote inclusion.” In another interview response, Greg combined the recommendations of more communication among classmates and more celebration of diverse perspectives:

I believe incorporating activities encouraging communication and understanding among students from diverse backgrounds would be beneficial. Including personal experiences, perhaps through short games or discussions related to each person's background, could enhance knowledge quickly and effectively.

Greg therefore recommended utilizing class discussions to explore and celebrate the diversity among the students in the class, thereby promoting inclusion and retention.

Two participants recommended hiring more minority faculty and administrators. Greg wrote in a questionnaire response,

I would suggest hiring more minorities in higher positions which would help nontraditional minority students in being successful in classes. Minorities such as I would feel more accepted and comfortable if their instructors could relate to them beyond an educational level. Additionally, it would also show the colleges inclusion of minorities which would enroll and retain more minority students.

Greg therefore perceived the hiring of minorities as a measure that would promote inclusion and retention of minority students by bringing on faculty and staff who could relate more meaningfully to the experiences of minority students than majority faculty could. Eve also said in an interview response, “The college should consider hiring more teachers from diverse backgrounds.” Lastly, Helen wrote in a questionnaire response, “I think it would help if there were a website that helps non-traditional students find other students who want to keep each

other accountable when it comes to studying, like a study buddy.” Thus, Helen recommended developing a web-based platform that minority students could use to network with one another.

Summary

The central research question in this study was: How can social inclusion be used as an instrument of retaining nontraditional students at a local community college when taking online classes? This question was addressed by addressing the three sub-questions that were derived from it. SQ1 was: What are the experiences of nontraditional minority students regarding inclusion at XYZ Community College? Two themes emerged during data analysis to address this question. The first SQ1 theme was: feedback from professors and discussion boards contributed to inclusion. The second SQ1 theme was: inclusion promoted retention. The participants contributed to this theme through their interview, journal, and questionnaire responses. SQ2 was: How do nontraditional minority students experience the way they are treated by administrators compared to other, non-minority students? The theme that emerged during data analysis to address this question was: administration-led inclusion initiatives increased inclusion and retention. SQ3 was: What actions can the local community college take to accommodate and retain nontraditional students taking global classes? The theme that emerged during data analysis to address this question was: increased inclusion efforts in remote learning can promote retention. Chapter 5 includes discussion, interpretation, and recommendations based on these findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of inclusion in retention for non-traditional students taking global learning classes (distance education) at XYZ Community College in the southeastern United States. The importance of this study is to yield unique empirical insights into the nature of online learning environments and enable community institutions to retain students. A qualitative research method and a hermeneutic phenomenological design are used to conduct this study. The qualitative research method helps in identifying explanations as to how social inclusion can be used as a retention tool for non-traditional minority students at XYZ Community College. The participants in this study are 10 non-traditional students in their first or second year at the institution. Data collection methods included questionnaires and interviews. Data is analyzed through a thematic data analysis approach. The central research question in this study was: How can social inclusion be used as an instrument of retaining non-traditional students at a local community college when taking online classes? Chapter 5 includes the interpretation of findings, implications for policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The discussion section has five major subsections including interpretation of findings, implications for policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations; and recommendations for future research. Inclusion can be an important aspect in the retention of non-traditional students taking global learning classes. This section presents a discussion of the results. Data analysis showed four major findings including feedback and

communication being important factors for inclusion, administrative support and treatment enhancing inclusion, increasing inclusion of non-traditional students and hiring more instructors of color and creating online platforms for social interaction increases retention.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The results indicated that feedback from professors and discussion boards contributed to the inclusion of non-traditional students. Research findings suggest that timely feedback from professors contributes to students' sense of inclusion leading to increased retention. Further, the findings revealed that inclusion promoted the retention of non-traditional students in an online learning environment in community colleges as participants had a positive quality of their experience of inclusion. Participants felt included at the community college which contributed to their retention. Most participants indicated that administration-led inclusion initiatives increased inclusion and retention among non-traditional students at community colleges in an online environment.

As reported by the participants the responsiveness of administrators when they asked for help contributed to their sense of inclusion and their intention to persist until graduation. Some of the actions that can be taken by local community colleges to accommodate and retain non-traditional students taking global classes and increase retention of minority students include increasing inclusion in online learning. Other recommendations as suggested by participants included facilitating more communication among classmates, holding more online meetings, more purposeful inclusion of diverse perspectives, hiring more minority instructors and administrators, and creating an online platform to facilitate social networking among students.

Interpretation of Findings

The interpretation of findings was based on the themes generated during data analysis. Four themes emerged during thematic data analysis. These themes include: (Theme 1) feedback from professors and discussion boards contributed to inclusion, (Theme 2) inclusion promoted retention, (Theme 3) Administration-Led Inclusion Initiatives Increased Inclusion and Retention, and (Theme 4) Increased Inclusion Efforts in Remote Learning Can Promote Retention. Four specific interpretations of the findings were discussed.

Fast Feedback and Communication Promote Inclusion

The first finding of this research showed the importance of fast feedback and communication in enhancing the inclusion of non-traditional students at XYZ community colleges. The need for fast feedback and effective communication is directly linked with improved inclusion of non-traditional students. Timely feedback to students learning through online classes makes them feel included and valued contributing to increased retention. The inclusion of non-traditional students contributes to enhanced retention. The research findings addressed the research question and research problem by establishing that fast feedback and effective communication promote the inclusion of non-traditional students in XYZ community college online classes, contributing to retention. The findings show that feedback plays a major role in promoting the inclusion of nontraditional students in online learning.

Current study findings concur with other studies about feedback and inclusion. Previous research indicated that having the drive and determination to keep studying can be enhanced through inclusion (Lopez et al., 2021). Students must be able to work and study effectively with good digital abilities enhanced real-time communication and fast feedback which makes this sort of learning the most effective (Lopez et al., 2021). This is consistent with current study findings

that feedback contributes to inclusion and in turn inclusion leads to enhanced retention of non-traditional students in XYZ community colleges.

The current study findings indicated that providing timely feedback promotes the inclusion of non-traditional students in XYZ community college online classes. However, this finding disconfirms previous research which revealed that to communicate complicated ideas or profound thoughts, email is better than synchronous conversation as students are concerned with how they study, how well they do academically, and how they present themselves in front of others (Bansak & Starr, 2021). The discrepancy in findings could be due to different settings, participants and methodologies adopted in these studies. Current study findings are consistent with previous research which underscored that learning practical skills in synchronous online environments is preferable, but students do better when the course is presented in an asynchronous format where students may make significant and insightful contributions and receive timely feedback for their contribution which enhanced inclusion and retention (Attanasio et al., 2019; Horowitz, 2020).

Similar to the current study findings, previous research established that synchronous learning increases commitment and drive among students (Attanasio et al., 2019). If students are engaged in collaborative forms like discussion and feedback, working with small groups, and delivering and getting feedback rather than lectures, self-assessments, or solo work, they are more likely to establish social relationships and be interested in online learning resulting in increased inclusion and retention of non-traditional students in XYZ community colleges (Horowitz, 2020). According to Tinto's theory, students who can successfully integrate into the academic and social life of the institution are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and

commitment to the institution as they feel included and valued (Hadjar et al., 2022). This, in turn, makes them more likely to persist in college.

Administrative Support and Treatment Enhances Inclusion and Retention

The second finding of this study demonstrated that administrative support and treatment through inclusion initiatives can have an impact on the inclusion and retention of nontraditional students. The study findings suggested the need for administration-led inclusion initiatives which are more likely to increase inclusion and retention in XYZ community colleges for online learning environments for non-traditional students. As per the findings, having administrators promote initiatives to enhance inclusion can lead to the retention of non-traditional students as they feel valued and part of the institutions' programs. These findings addressed the study problem and the research question by establishing that the promotion of inclusion by administrators at XYZ community colleges could contribute to enhanced retention of non-traditional online learning students. The study results suggest the need for administration support in programs that promote inclusion for improved student retention in these community colleges.

These current research findings disconfirm previous research findings which underscored that the educators' characteristics, teaching behaviors, the curriculum used, the contexts surrounding student-teacher interactions, and teaching materials as key factors affecting the inclusion of non-traditional students in online classes for improved retention (Faulkner et al., 2021). While current research emphasized the importance of administrators' led inclusion and retention, Faulkner et al. (2021) asserted the significance of student-teacher relationships, and educators whose communication behaviors were supportive and immediate were viewed as more inclusive and welcoming by students which contributed to improved retention of non-traditional online learning students at XYZ community colleges. The differences in findings could be a

result of using diverse study settings, participants, methodologies, and sample sizes in these studies.

Whereas the current research findings contradicted some previous research outcomes, the current study findings confirm other previous studies which revealed that by prioritizing student concerns, identities, and experiences, and fostering supportive and immediate communication, administrators and educators can play a pivotal role in enhancing inclusion for non-traditional minority students in both online and in-person courses which promote increased student retention in XYZ community colleges (Remenick, 2019). Promoting student retention in online courses extends beyond the individual student as administrators of institutions of higher education have a vital role in creating a supportive infrastructure that recognizes and addresses the unique needs of online learners (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Factors such as student engagement, support, collaboration, and individual characteristics play a significant role in student retention and success in both online and in-person courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019). The current research findings contribute to previous research by revealing that administrator-led inclusion contributes to student retention in an online learning environment.

Promoting Inclusion in Online Learning Improves Retention

The third major finding of this study revealed that increasing inclusion in online learning can be a major factor in enhancing the retention of non-traditional students at XYZ community colleges. Current research provides the actions that can be taken by local community colleges to retain non-traditional students taking online classes and increase the retention of minority students including increasing inclusion in online learning. This finding addressed the research problem and the research question by identifying increased inclusion in online learning as a major factor for enhancing the retention of non-traditional students at XYZ community colleges.

The results are consistent with past studies which demonstrated that educators who promote inclusion in online learning are those who foster participation among their students by improving understanding through frequent communication and pedagogical strategies that enhance retention (Valcarlos et al., 2020). Concurring with current study findings, previous researchers emphasized the importance of establishing frameworks to promote inclusion and prevent exclusion in online education that purposefully inform pedagogical decisions (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020; Mseleku, 2020; Valcarlos et al., 2020).

Inclusion can be increased through facilitating more communication among classmates, holding more online meetings, and more purposeful inclusion of diverse perspectives. If communication is enhanced through holding more online meetings among classmates for more purposeful inclusion of diverse perspectives, non-traditional students may feel valued and important which leads increased rate of retention. However, previous research indicated that in-person students can easily eschew participation, allowing their mere presence in the classroom to act as intellectual buy-in leading to enhanced inclusion and retention (Barksdale, 2019). The difference in findings could be caused by diversity in study settings, participants used methodologies adopted as well as the sample sizes used in these studies. However, current findings concur with other previous research which highlighted that online courses often have online discussion requirements that demand interaction with both classmates and the material (Barksdale, 2019; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020).

Unlike current study findings, Parmigiani et al. (2021) found that the factors that had the most significant influence on online inclusion stemmed from technology, familial relationships, and classroom environments, noting the important role teachers played in fostering an inclusive and interactive educational environment to enhance retention. Parmigiani et al.'s ((2021)

findings highlight how certain pedagogical decisions, resources, and social interactions contribute to online learning inclusion in higher education. The contradiction in findings could be due to different settings, methodologies and participants used in these studies. Current research shows the need to facilitate more communication among classmates, hold more online meetings, and engage in more purposeful inclusion of diverse perspectives among students to promote inclusion and retention.

Implementing Diversity in Hiring Policies Can Promote Inclusivity and Retention

The fourth major finding of this study indicated that to increase the inclusion of non-traditional students at XYZ community colleges' online classes, there is a need to adopt diversity policies to hire more minority instructors and administrators and create online platforms for social networking among students.

From the current study findings, the need to hire more minority instructors and administrators as well as create online platforms to enhance social networking among students is paramount for promoting inclusion and retention of students at XYZ community colleges. These findings addressed the research question and the study problem by revealing that recruiting minority instructors and administrators and creating online platforms could contribute to improved inclusion and retention. The findings were also reported in previous research which revealed that it was critical of schools that express unshakeable commitment to inclusivity in policies and discourse while doing little to disrupt norms and enhance inclusion in a way that could meaningfully shape students' experiences which may lead to retention of more students (Slee, 2019). Slee (2019) argued that privilege was not just possessing material resources, but social resources as well, expressed in belonging through online platforms that promote communication and social networking among students. The current research outcomes contribute

to the previous literature by establishing that employing more minority educators and administrators as well as developing plans for online interaction among students could promote inclusion and retention of students in an online learning environment.

The concept of creating online platforms aligns with previous studies which also indicated that learning platforms used for online college courses are elements of the online learning experience that can shape students' learning experiences and outcomes through social networking leading to inclusion and retention (Detres et al., 2020; Moore & Rutledge, 2018). In acknowledgement of student retention issues associated with online learning, researchers such as Moore and Rutledge (2018) also highlighted how learning platform-related factors can be leveraged to reduce disparities in course completion between traditional and online courses. Online learning tools and platforms facilitate enhanced interaction and student engagement in computer-mediated learning environments leading to improved inclusion and student retention (Moore & Rutledge, 2018). The current research outcomes contribute to past empirical literature by demonstrating various factors that can enhance the inclusion and retention of non-traditional students at XYZ community colleges including creating online platforms for social networking and hiring more minority instructors and administrators.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This section provides several implications for this study. The implications for policy and practice are discussed under specific subsections. These subsections include implications for policy and implications for practice.

Implications for Policy

The current study findings might be used by policymakers who could create education policies regarding the inclusivity of minority non-traditional students in online learning

environments. The policies could include hiring more minority educators and administrators to enhance inclusivity in community colleges. Such policies are more likely to promote inclusion and retention of more students in online learning and reduce discrimination. Insights from the empirical data can aid educators and policy leaders in ameliorating issues of discrimination plaguing educational institutions as online education has grown in popularity among community college students globally during the last two decades (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020).

School districts may also use this study's findings to establish education regulations that promote the inclusion of minority students with limited resources to engage in online learning environments. This could include establishing online platforms to facilitate social networking and interaction among students and administrators to foster equality in course design and implementation. By making these policies and regulations mandatory across colleges and schools in the districts, states and nations, inclusion and retention could be increased among students. Students felt that their social support networks were more dispersed in online learning settings than in conventional classrooms (Horowitz, 2020).

Implications for Practice

This study yields unique empirical insights into the nature of online learning environments including the need to enhance timely feedback in community colleges and other learning institutions with online learning programs. Community college administrators may be influenced by this study's findings to promote timely feedback to enhance the inclusion of non-traditional students and other students in online classes, leading to improved retention. Leaders in learning institutions may use these findings to understand the importance of timely feedback from professors that contributes to students' sense of inclusion leading to increased retention in online learning classes. Making significant and insightful contributions such as providing timely

feedback to students ensures the administrator's contribution which enhances inclusion and retention of non-traditional (Attanasio et al., 2019; Horowitz, 2020).

Higher learning institutions could also implement this study's findings by creating discussion boards that allow social interaction among students to promote inclusion and retention. Students' participation with their classmates in discussion boards contributes to a sense of inclusion that promotes increased retention. Social interaction promotes student engagement in which non-traditional students may share knowledge and ideas with traditional students contributing to enhanced inclusion and retention. Having the drive and determination to keep studying can be enhanced through inclusion that provides students with a sense of belonging leading to retention (Lopez et al., 2021).

Community college administrators could also adopt this research's findings by establishing administration-led initiatives including creating opportunities for diversity in the education group, the multicultural centre, and the family scholar house. These initiatives would promote inclusion as students would feel valued and included contributing to retention of more students in online learning courses. Further, XYZ Community College may benefit from this study's findings by increasing inclusion in online learning, facilitating more communication among classmates, and hiring more minority instructors and administrators. Implementing these suggestions would promote the inclusion of students thus increasing their retention. Moore and Rutledge (2018) established how learning platform-related factors can be leveraged to reduce disparities in course completion between traditional and online courses.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This section of implications is based on theoretical framework and empirical literature. The implications for theory and empirical literature are discussed under specific subsections. These subsections are theoretical implications and empirical implications.

Empirical Implications

This study's findings concur with empirical study findings of Slee (2019) who argued that privilege was not just possessing material resources, but social resources as well, expressed in belonging through online platforms that promote communication and social networking among students. The implication is that both current research and empirical literatures suggest the need for social networking among students through effective communication. This study's findings contribute to empirical research by establishing the importance of establishing frameworks to promote inclusion and prevent exclusion in online education that purposefully inform pedagogical decisions (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020).

The convergence in findings between empirical research and this study, provide an implication that inclusion of non-traditional students in online learning can promote retention. Increasing inclusion in online learning can be a major factor in enhancing the retention of non-traditional students at the XYZ community college as highlighted in both the empirical research and this study' findings (Mehta & Aguilera, 2020). The implication is that increasing inclusion in online learning can promote retention of more non-traditional students. As indicated in the current study and the empirical literature by Faulkner et al. (2021), inclusion can be achieved by enhancing administration support in programs that promote inclusion for improved student retention in these community colleges. Thus, this study's findings have significantly contributed to the empirical research by highlighting the factors that promotes inclusion and retention of non-traditional students in online learning classes.

Theoretical Implications

This study was rooted in the concepts of Tinto's model (1975). Tinto's model, an influential theory in higher education that explains why some students persist and succeed in their academic pursuits while others leave or drop out of college (Nicoletti, 2019), was also adopted in this study. In this study, Tinto's model served as the theoretical framework to comprehensively investigate the factors influencing the retention of nontraditional students in distance education classes. Tinto's model was particularly relevant as it underscores the significance of successful academic and social integration for students' persistence in college (Tinto, 1975). The research supports the theory by establishing various factors that influence student inclusion in online learning including facilitating more communication among classmates and hiring more minority instructors and administrators. This would help nontraditional students, who often have distinct learning styles and needs compared to their traditional counterparts.

By adopting Tinto's model, this study sought to gain a deeper understanding of how nontraditional students navigate the intricacies of distance education, including the barriers they encounter in their efforts to integrate academically and socially. As such, the current research has provided various challenges faced by non-traditional students such as lack of timely feedback, limited social interaction, and financial struggles. The implication is that despite the challenges experienced non-traditional students require diverse factors to enhance their inclusion in online learning classes and promote their retention. Tinto's model was relevant as it underscores the significance of successful social integration for students' persistence in college. In particular, this study's findings support Tinto's concept of social interaction by establishing the need to facilitate more communication among classmates and hiring more minority instructors and administrators. The implication is the promotion of inclusivity in online learning through

persistence, support, and collaboration among learners to enhance the retention of non-traditional students. The table below indicates the theoretical implications:

Table 5

Theoretical Implications

Theoretical Framework	Theoretical Implications
Tinto's Model	<p data-bbox="537 548 1421 674">Tinto's model relies on two principles including academic integration and social interaction for persistence in education.</p> <p data-bbox="537 779 1421 1255">The findings support Tinto's concept of academic integration by suggesting the need for inclusion in online learning among nontraditional students. Such inclusivity in online classes promotes the retention of students. The implication is the adoption of inclusive online learning platforms that would promote interaction to enhance persistence in learning and retention of students.</p> <p data-bbox="537 1360 1421 1871">Tinto's model was relevant as it underscores the significance of successful social integration for students' persistence in college. In particular, this study's findings support Tinto's concept of social interaction by establishing the need to facilitate more communication among classmates and hiring more minority instructors and administrators. The implication is the promotion of inclusivity in online learning through persistence, support, and</p>

collaboration among learners to enhance the retention of non-traditional students.

Limitations and Delimitations

This section provides the limitations and delimitations of the study. While limitations are characteristics that can influence the researcher's interpretation, delimitations of a study are the exclusionary factors that limit the scope of the study. The limitations and delimitations of this study are discussed below.

Limitations

The current study failed to establish the diverse challenges faced by non-traditional students in accessing online classes. The findings indicated different factors that could lead to the inclusion and subsequent retention of students. Students may be influenced to engage in online learning classes, however, challenges that may hinder their inclusion were not addressed in this study. Addressing such challenges would provide insight into how to promote inclusivity and retention of nontraditional students. The study was also limited by low participation in the study by the participants as evidenced by low responses from the questionnaire responses.

Another limitation of this study was that participants could not answer some questions as stated because they could not attest to the experiences of other, non-minority students. The participants were only able to attest to their own experiences of how they were treated by administrators. The treatment that the participants reported was positive. The participants reported having their inclusion and retention promoted by administration-led initiatives such as the CODE (Creating Opportunities for Diversity in Education) group, the Multicultural Center (or Hub), and the Family Scholar House. The failure to answer questions about the experiences

of non-minority students could limit the generalizability of the findings to non-minority students who experience challenges in participating in online learning classes.

Delimitations

One of the delimitations of this study was the sampling technique adopted. Purposive sampling was adopted in this study. Purposive is used to select participants based on the researchers' judgement. As a result, there was a likelihood of selection bias by the researcher. The study sample was purposively selected and comprised of male and female minority participants in any year of the study. To mitigate the limitation of selection bias, the researcher used a third party to help select participants for the study.

The study was also delimited to minority groups of student non-traditional students. This study was primarily concerned with minority groups, and thus a representative sample of non-white students was pursued. This indicates that the study findings may only be applied to the minority populations and may not be applied to other populations such as whites due to perceptions the participants may have concerning online learning. Minority groups may also be facing challenges that are not similar to those faced by whites which could make the transferability and generalizability of the study's findings more challenging

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study failed to establish the diverse challenges faced by non-traditional students in accessing online classes. The findings indicated different factors that could lead to the inclusion and subsequent retention of students. Based on this limitation, future research should be conducted to explore various challenges to inclusion among non-traditional students in online learning environments. Future researchers should also adopt a qualitative phenomenological

research design to understand students' perceptions concerning challenges and experiences in accessing online learning classes in an online learning environment.

Although current research findings revealed various suggestions to enhance inclusion and retention among non-traditional students, there is a need to adopt a quantitative correlational research design to establish correlations between these variables including holding more online meetings, more purposeful inclusion of diverse perspectives, hiring more minority instructors and administrators, and social networking, academic success and retention. The quantitative research would provide more insights into how these factors impact non-traditional students' academic success and retention.

This study was delimited to a specific geographical setting. This could affect the transferability of study findings. The study setting was at a local community college in the eastern part of the United States. As a result, further research should be conducted with data from different geographical settings and diverse populations including white students and traditional students to enhance the generalizability and transferability of study findings.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of inclusion in retention for non-traditional students taking global learning classes at XYZ Community College in the southeastern United States. The importance of this study was to yield unique empirical insights into the nature of online learning environments and enable community institutions to retain students. This study yields unique empirical insights into the nature of online learning environments including the need to enhance diverse factors to promote inclusion which in turn contributes to improved retention among non-traditional students. Factors such as timely feedback, social interaction, student engagement, communication among classmates, and hiring

more minority instructors and administrators as well as social networking in community colleges and other learning institutions with online learning programs could be of much benefit to community colleges and students. Current research results may help in understanding what it takes to promote learning in an online environment, especially for non-traditional minority students with limited resources and how to improve their academic success through increased retention.

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Appendix A IRB Approval

Date: 2-22-2024

IRB #: IRB-FY23-24-143

Title: RETENTION OF PREDOMINANTLY NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION CLASSES IN A LOCAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Creation Date: 7-28-2023

End Date:

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Corina Langford

Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial	Review Type Expedited	Decision Approved
Submission Type Modification	Review Type Unassigned	Decision

Key Study Contacts

Member Kevin White	Role Co-Principal Investigator	Contact [REDACTED]
Member Corina Langford	Role Principal Investigator	Contact [REDACTED]
Member Corina Langford	Role Primary Contact	Contact [REDACTED]

Appendix B Site Permission



September 27, 2023
Corina Langford
Liberty University
clangford4@liberty.edu
1971 University Blvd,
Lynchburg, VA 24515

RE: The Retention of Predominantly Nontraditional Students: A Phenomenological Study of Distance Education Classes in a Local Community College

Dear Ms. Langford,

The Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) has carefully reviewed your submission. The HRPP has determined that your protocol meets the criteria established in 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)(ii). As a result, your proposed research is exempt from the provisions of the Common Rule. If you wish to change the research protocol during your investigation in any way that would exceed the rationale for this exemption, you must first submit a modification request to the KCTCS HRPP. Research beyond this exemption may not commence unless and until approved by the HRPP. Thank you for your cooperation with KCTCS in protecting human subjects. If we can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Anthony Pinson
Program Reporting Coordinator
KCTCS Human Subjects Administrator



Date: 2-22-2024

IRB #: IRB-FY23-24-143
Title: RETENTION OF PREDOMINANTLY NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION CLASSES IN A LOCAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Creation Date: 7-28-2023
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Corina Langford
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial	Review Type Expedited	Decision Approved
Submission Type Modification	Review Type Unassigned	Decision

Key Study Contacts

Member Kevin White	Role Co-Principal Investigator	Contact
Member Corina Langford	Role Principal Investigator	Contact
Member Corina Langford	Role Primary Contact	Contact

Appendix C

Recruitment Email

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral candidate in the school of education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to understand the impact of inclusion in retention for nontraditional students taking online classes (distance education) at a local Community College in the eastern part of the United States, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be:

1. 18 to 50 years old,
2. in your 1st or 2nd year in the institution,
3. from nontraditional groups with diverse backgrounds, specifically African American, Latino, and Native American students, and
4. have distance education classes.

Participants will be asked to:

1. Participate in an online, audio-recorded interview via Zoom that will take no more than 1 hour.
2. Review and validate transcribed interview responses via email (20 minutes).
3. Complete a physical or digital questionnaire and submit it via post or email (30 to 45 minutes).

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] to schedule an interview. I will ask a few questions to ensure that you meet my participant criteria. If you meet my participant criteria, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

A consent document will be emailed to you if you meet the study criteria. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me before via email or at the time of the interview.

Participants will receive \$20 as compensation for their time if they complete the interview and questionnaire.

Sincerely,

Corina Langford
Doctoral Candidate

[REDACTED]

Appendix D
Consent Document
Consent

Title of the Project: Retention of Predominantly Nontraditional Students: A Phenomenological Study of Distance Education Classes in a Local Community College

Principal Investigator: Cora Langford, 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:

1. 18 to 50 years old,
2. in your 1st or 2nd year in the institution,
3. from nontraditional groups with diverse backgrounds, specifically African American, Asian, Latino, and Native American students, and
4. have distance education classes.

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 understand the impact of inclusion in retention for nontraditional students taking global learning classes (distance education) at a local Community College in the eastern part of the United States.

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. Participate in an online, audio-recorded interview via teams that will take no more than 1 hour.
2. Review and validate transcribed interview responses via email (20 minutes).
3. Complete a digital attachment that you will receive by email questionnaire and submit it via email (30 to 45 minutes).
4. Journal prompts (20-30 minutes) That you will receive by email.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include gaining an understanding on the experiences of nontraditional minority students in distance education.

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.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. 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 interview session, participants will receive \$20 as compensation for their time. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes; however, they will be separated from your responses to maintain your confidentiality.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. 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 will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Corina Langford. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]

██████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Kevin White, at ██████████.

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 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

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 agree 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