How Multiple Roles Influence Adult College Women's Online Student Experiences in a Rural Community College Context

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How multiple roles influence adult college women’s online student experiences in a rural community college context

by

Lisa C. Hetzel

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2012

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DEDICATION

To Daddy who told me I could do anything I wanted to.

To Gram who told me she wished she had the opportunities women do today.
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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how adult college women attending rural community colleges experience being an online student. A study of this nature was warranted as enrollment in online courses continues to increase (Allen & Seaman, 2010) and as women are more likely to enroll in online courses (Kramarae, 2001; van Prummer, 2011). Femininst standpoint theory guided the study while identity theory (Stryker, 1968) was applied to findings. Online research methods were used to collect data. Four themes characterized participants online student experience: 1) motivation to enroll in online courses, 2) expectations and realities about online experience, 3) impact of identity (ies) on experience, and 4) meaning of being an online student. These findings could be used to help community colleges and other institutions of higher education to better understand how adult college women experience being online students. Faculty members who teach online courses or who are considering to teach online courses could benefit from these findings as could college staff members who work with adult online students. These findings could also benefit adult college women who are considering to enroll in online courses.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Enrollment in online courses is rapidly increasing. In fall 2009, close to 5.6 million students were taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2010a). Compare this number to the 1.6 million students in fall 2002 who took at least one online course and it becomes clear that enrollment in online courses has increased tremendously (Allen & Seaman, 2010b). Not only is enrollment in online courses growing, but so too is the number of online courses being offered. Institutions are adding online course offerings for many reasons, including: to increase student access (Allen & Seaman, 2007), to attract students from outside the institution’s traditional service area, to compensate for limited classroom space, and to accommodate students’ increasingly busy schedules and lives (Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001).

Problem

Women are enrolling in college at higher proportions than men. In 2008, 55% of college students were women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Not only are women enrolling at higher proportions than men, but they are graduating in higher proportions as well. In 2007-2008, 62.3% of associate degrees, 57.3% of bachelor’s degrees, 60.6% of master’s degrees, and 51% of doctoral degrees were awarded to women (Aud et al., 2010). These statistics are significant when one considers that it was not until 1837 that women were able to enroll in college, whereas men have had access to higher education since 1636 with the founding of Harvard (Rudolph, 1990).

Several researchers indicated that as women pursue higher education they are more likely to enroll in online courses (Kramarae, 2001; van Prummer, 2011). Online courses may
be attractive to women in part because of their multiple roles and responsibilities. By enrolling in online courses, women are able to manage the roles and responsibilities they have while still pursuing a higher education. As online education is increasing and as “women are the primary users of online education” (Kramarae, 2001, p. 5), it is necessary to examine the experiences of women enrolled in online courses.

**Purpose and Significance**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand how adult women attending rural community colleges experience being an online student. A study of this nature is needed for several reasons. First, enrollment in online education continues to grow, and understanding how adult female students experience online courses is important to both institutions that offer online course and adult female students who are thinking about enrolling in online courses. Institutions that offer online courses will benefit from this study by understanding how adult, rural women experience asynchronous online courses. Institutions will be better able to design and plan online courses. Adult women who are thinking of becoming an online student will benefit from knowing how other adult women have experienced being an online student. Second, as women are more likely to enroll in online courses, it is particularly important to understand how women experience being an online student. Third, a review of the literature indicates there is a lack of studies which intentionally focus on women and their experiences as online students.

**Research Question**

The overarching research question that guided this qualitative study was: How do adult women attending rural community colleges experience being an online student? To answer this overarching question, the following sub-questions were utilized:
1. What factors motivated adult college women to enroll in online courses?

2. What expectations did adult college women have about online courses and what being an online student would entail prior to becoming an online student? What was the reality of their experience?

3. How did various identities impact and/or influence adult college women and their online student experience? Specifically, how did being a woman, how did multiple roles, and how did geographical location impact and/or influence being an online student?

4. What did being an online student mean to adult college women?

**Impetus for Study**

My introduction to online education began 2008 when I developed an online course for the Women’s Studies program at Iowa State University. Prior to this, my knowledge of and understanding about online education was very rudimentary in that all I knew was that courses were taken “through” the computer. To prepare myself for developing an online course, I began researching online education by reading books and articles and by interviewing current online instructors. I researched and gathered information on both course development and delivery methods in fall 2008, developed the course in spring 2009, and launched the course in summer 2009. I clearly remember the first time I taught the course. I was overwhelmed by the amount of work involved with online teaching. Managing 35 students, their assignments, feedback on those assignments, and e-mail communication was overwhelming. Several students commented that this online course was unlike any other online course they had taken. I asked what they meant and responses primarily focused on the amount of reading and number of assignments. I did make adjustments as I realized that
what looked good on paper did not always look good in practice. While I cared about and was curious about the student experience, I was more focused on my experience and surviving this first foray into online teaching.

As I continued teaching online, I found myself wondering more and more about how students experience online courses. My observations suggested that students did and do experience online courses differently. Some students appeared to be more engaged or involved with the course material as evident by the quality of their postings, the number of times they logged into the course, and posting in non-required discussion boards. I noticed that the students who appeared more engaged and involved in the course were non-traditional female students. Granted, their engagement may have been a function of being enrolled in a Women’s Studies course and resonating with the course material, but I did not think so.

**Audience for the Study**

Institutions as well as individuals who are interested in and/or invested in distance education/online education will find this study beneficial. As students continue to enroll in online courses and as women are more likely to enroll in online courses (Kramarae, 2001; van Prummer, 2011), it is necessary that all involved with distance education understand how adult women experience being an online student. By understanding how adult women experience being an online student, institutions will be able to proactively address issues adult women encounter as online students. Institutions will also be able to better orient and train faculty and staff members who work with adult online students. Likewise, other adult online students may be interested in understanding how online courses are experienced.
Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks were used in this research study. The first, feminist standpoint theory, served to both frame and guide the study as its foundational tenets informed this study. The second, identity theory, was employed to understand study findings. Each theory is briefly described below and more fully in Chapter 2.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

The theoretical framework guiding this study is feminist standpoint theory (FST). FST posits that experience is the basis for knowledge. Specifically, FST focuses on women’s experiences and believes examining women’s lives and their experiences is necessary for a more complete and accurate understanding of the world (Harding, 1991). Experiences, according to FST, are influenced by one’s social location (Harding, 1993/2004), which “refers to a person’s position (and the intersection of positions) where race, class, gender, and other constantly shifting social group formations that exist within a network of political and economic power relations, define position” (Zaytoun, 2006, p. 69). For purposes of this study, the social location category of gender is the specific social location lens that was used to understand how women experiences online courses. Feminist standpoint theory is explained in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Identity Theory

Identity theory (Stryker, 1968) explains the relationship between one’s identity and one’s behavior. Identity is defined as the “meanings attached to oneself by self and others” (Gecas & Burke, 1995, p. 42). An individual’s identity has many meanings and is complex. Complexity in the self is manifested through multiple roles individuals hold. For each role a person holds there is a corresponding identity. Roles identities “are meanings one attributes
to oneself in a role and that others attribute to one” (Burke & Reitzes, 1981, p. 84). A person’s role identities are organized into a salience hierarchy (Stryker, 1968). A salient identity is an identity that is most likely to be activated or enacted across various situations (Stryker, 1968). Identity salience is influenced by how committed or not committed one is to the role identity (Stryker, 1980/2002). The more committed one is to a role identity, the more salient that role identity is. Likewise, the less committed one is to a role identity the less salient that role identity is. Identity theory is described in greater detail in Chapter 2.

**Summary of Research Design and Approach**

Phenomenology is the methodological framework guiding this study. Creswell and Maietta (2002) indicated “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of the lived experiences surrounding a concept or phenomenon” (p. 151). Merriam (2002) echoed this saying, “a phenomenological study seeks to understand the essence or structure of a phenomenon” (p. 93). As the purpose of this study is to understand how adult women experience asynchronous online courses, phenomenology is an appropriate methodology to employ, as it will allow me to gain a better understanding of how adult women experience asynchronous online courses. Data were collected by conducting asynchronous online interviews with adult women who are enrolled in asynchronous online courses. Collecting data in this manner is warranted as doing so aligns with the purpose of this study. Data were analyzed and themes generated using procedural steps specific to phenomenology as outlined by Hycner (1999) and is explained more fully in Chapter 3.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, this study focuses on adult rural women in the Midwest, and their experiences may or may not be similar to adult rural
women in other geographical regions. Second, this study focuses on asynchronous online courses. It is possible that enrollment in synchronous online courses or hybrid courses may yield different experiences. Third, this study is employing online research methods and as a result may attract a particular type of participant as opposed to using face-to-face research methods. It is possible that this difference in participants may contribute to different experiences.

**Delimitations**

This study is delimited to adult women’s experiences as asynchronous online students but would be useful to all students enrolled in online courses or those thinking of enrolling in online courses. Further, this study would be useful to institutions that offer online courses.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

This dissertation comprises six chapters. Each chapter focuses on a specific aspect of the research study. The first chapter provides an introduction to the research study by discussing the rationale and significance of the study.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature as it relates to adult college students, aspects of online education that are broadly and commonly studied, what is known about online education as it relates to women, and rural education. Additionally, feminist standpoint theory and identity theory are presented.

Information pertaining to methodology, participant selection, data collection methods, and data analysis is presented in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 contains participant profiles which provide a snapshot of each study participant. Each profile contains general demographic information as well as a summary of the interview.
Findings from the study are presented in Chapter 5. Findings were determined by an analysis of the interview data and have been organized by ensuing themes.

Chapter 6 provides a review of the study, a discussion of the findings in relation to previous research and, and recommendations for both practice and future study.

Definitions

In order to understand the study, ensuing findings, and implications, it is important for the reader to be familiar with the language and vocabulary found in this study. To that end, the following terms are defined:

**Asynchronous courses/delivery:** Asynchronous courses/delivery occurs when the receiving and delivering of instruction occurs at different times.

**Distance education:** An umbrella term that describes education that is delivered from a distance. Examples include correspondence courses, ICN courses, webinars, and internet-based courses.

**Emoticons:** Emoticons are used to express emotion in e-mail or other electronic communication. Emoticons are “also called smileys, those little keyboard strokes that are shorthand for feelings” (Kramer, 2002). Examples of emoticons include: 😊, 😐, :–P, and :–J.

**Online education:** “A process by which students and teachers communicate with one another and interact with course content via Internet-based learning technologies” (Bollinger & Wasilik, 2009, p. 103).

**Synchronous courses/delivery:** Synchronous courses/delivery occurs when the student receives instruction at the same time that the teacher is delivering instruction. Synchronous instruction is real-time instruction.
**Rural:** The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) established a classification system using an institution’s physical longitude and latitude to identify institutions as either city, suburban, town, or rural. Within this new classification system, NCES used the U.S. Census Bureau definition of rural and then subdivided rural into three sub-categories: fringe, distant, and remote (Provasnik et al., 2007). The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as all areas not included within an urban area. Urban areas consist of urbanized areas (UA) and urban clusters (UC). A minimum of 2,500 residents is needed to be considered an urban area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter focuses on a review of the following areas: 1) adult college students, 2) distance education demographics, 3) a history of distance education, 4) what is known about online education, 5) what is known about women and online education, and 6) rural education.

Adult College Students

Adult college students, typically defined as students 25 years of age and older (Kasworm, 2003), represent both a significant proportion of today’s college student as well as a growing population in higher education. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data indicated 38% of the 2007 enrollment of more than 18 million college students were 25 years of age and older (NCES, 2009, as cited in Ross-Gordon, 2011). NCES data also revealed the percentage increase in the number of students age 25 and older has been larger than the percentage increase in the number of students younger than 25. Between 2000 and 2009 the enrollment of students under age 25 increased by 27% whereas enrollment of students age 25 and older rose 43% during the same time period (NCES, 2011). Further, NCES projects a 23% rise in enrollment of students 25 years of age and older between 2010 and 2019 (NCES, 2011). While adult college student enrollment has increased in general, the number of adult college women specifically has grown. Kasworm (2003) noted that between 1970 and 2000, adult college women enrollments increased by 59.2% while male adult enrollments increased by 40.8% (p. 5). This increase in adult college women is not surprising when one considers that during the ten year time period between 1999-2009 the number of women enrolled in higher education rose 40% (NCES, 2011).
The terms adult college student and non-traditional student are often used interchangeably as both refer to students who are 25 years of age and older (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). To better understand adult college students and non-traditional students, various scholars have identified characteristics to describe both adult college students and non-traditional students. Horn (1996 as cited in NCES, 2002), using NCES data, examined the relationship between non-traditional students and persistence in postsecondary education and identified non-traditional students as having the following characteristics:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
- Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year;
- Works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining financial aid;
- Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
- Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents);
- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a G.E.D. or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school; Choy, 2002, pp. 2-3)

Adult college students have been characterized by “status of age, status of maturity and developmental complexity, and status of responsible and often competing sets of adult roles” (Kasworm, 2003, p. 3). Compton, Cox, and Laanan (2006) posit adult students have the following characteristics:

- Adult students are more likely to pursue an educational program leading to a vocational certificate or degree.
Adult students have focused goals for their education—typically to gain or enhance work skills.

Adult students consider themselves primarily workers and not students.

Adult students are more likely to enroll in distance education.

Adult students are more likely to leave postsecondary education without earning a degree. (p. 74)

Regardless of what term is used—adult college student or non-traditional student—it is clear from the preceding characteristics that adult students, in addition to being students, have multiple roles and responsibilities to fulfill. Adult college women typically have more roles and responsibilities to fulfill than adult college men due to the gendered nature of women’s work (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2010). Specifically, women “still carry the main responsibility for housework and raising children” (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2010, p. 307). This is not to say that men do not raise children or “tend to” household chores, but society expects and assumes that raising children and maintaining the home is women’s work.

Multiple roles and responsibilities lead to role strain. Role strain is “the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations” (Goode, 1960, p. 483). Role theorists have delineated three dimensions of role strain, including:

1. Role conflict – “the extent to which a person experiences pressures within one role that are incompatible with the pressures that arise within another role:

   (Kopelman et al., 1983, p. 201).

2. Role overload – “having too many role demands and too little time to fulfill them”

   (Coverman, 1989, p. 967).

As one considers the various roles adult college women hold—employee/employer, spouse/partner, mother/caregiver, sister, aunt, community volunteer, and student—it becomes evident that adult college women have the potential to experience all three dimensions of role strain.

Most role strain studies traditionally have focused on women’s work and women’s family lives. However, as the number of adult women enrolling in postsecondary education increased, studies incorporating the student role have increased. Home (1997, 1998) surveyed 443 adult college women enrolled in 17 Canadian social work, nursing, and adult education programs with the purpose of identifying predictors of role strain. Findings indicated adult college women with higher perceived role demands had more role strain. If women perceive all their roles to be demanding, role strain is inevitable as whatever role women attend to prevents them from fulfilling their other high demand roles. And as a result they may feel conflicted or guilty for spending time on that role rather than their other roles. Home (1997, 1998) also found that women with a lower income reported a higher role strain, as did women with children under 13 years of age. A possible explanation for why mothers of children under the age of 13 reported higher role strain is that younger children are not as self-sufficient and require more attention and supervision than older children resulting in more time spent in the mothering role than in other roles. Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) surveyed 350 adult college women enrolled in a southeastern state’s largest community college and found that women who are parents or have parenting responsibilities were “excessively burdened by the stressful demands of parenting” (p. 297). While Johnson
et al. (2003) did not specify age of participants’ children as Home’s (1997, 1998) study did, Johnson et al. (2003) did note that parenting responsibilities exist for a significant period of time.

Role strain may be a significant source of stress in adult college women (McBride, 1988). Studies have suggested that social support minimizes psychological distress (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). As a result, researchers have examined sources of social support and the role it plays in adult college students lives. Kirby, Biever, Martinez, and Gomez (2004) examined the impact of attending a Weekend College program in adult students’ family, work, and social life. The Weekend College program was specifically developed for working adults to complete undergraduate and graduate degrees. Kirby, et al. (2004) administered a survey consisting of 26 items and three open-ended questions to 566 students enrolled in Weekend College programs. Participants included both male and female students enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate programs. The survey consisted of items focusing on the impact of school on family and work. Study findings indicated that participants who had family support and work support had lower levels of stress.

While Kirby’s et al. (2004) study included both male and female participants, Quimby and O’Brien (2006) specifically investigated factors that predict psychological well-being among adult college women with children. Quimby and O’Brien designed a survey consisting of 110 items, which measured attachment style, perceived social support, role management self-efficacy, and well-being. Two hundred nine adult women enrolled at a large midwestern university who ranged in age from 26 to 53 years old completed the survey. Quimby and O’Brien concluded that participants “who were securely attached, confident in
managing student and parent roles, and perceived that social support was available also indicated low levels of psychological distress” (p. 455). Related, participants who were securely attached, confident in managing school and parenting, and perceived high levels of social support tended to have high levels of self-esteem” (p. 456).

Plageman and Sabina (2010) conducted a study to examine perceived support of family members from both the family of origin as well as the current family on adult college women. Fifty-four adult college women enrolled as undergraduate students at a small public college participated in the study. Participants completed an electronic survey in which they were asked to rate family members on their level of support for the participant to both attend and persist toward a degree. The survey also asked participants to rate family members on the importance of 12 statements related to support. Findings indicated that within the family of origin, “mean support to attend was highest for the mother, followed by sister, and then other family members. Mothers were also rated highest for support to persist, followed by sisters, and then other family members” (p. 161). Findings also indicated that within the current family, “the highest supporter to attend was highest for other family members, followed by mothers, spouse/partner, and friends. The highest mean support to persist was other family members, mother, spouse/partner, and friends” (p. 161).

**Distance Education by the Numbers**

The number of individuals taking distance education courses is rapidly growing. In fall 2009, close to 5.6 million students were taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2010a). In fall 2008, there were over 4.6 million students taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Of the 4.6 million students taking an online course, over 82% are undergraduates, 14% are graduate students, and 4% are in some other for-credit
course (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Further, if one compares total enrollment in higher education (a little over 19 million students) to the number of students enrolled in online learning during fall 2009, online learning students represents over 29% of total enrollments in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2010). As these statistics illustrate, online education is growing rapidly and comprises a significant proportion of enrolled students.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 2,746 postsecondary institutions offered distance education courses during the 2006-2007 academic year (NCES, 2008). Ninety-seven percent of public 2-year institutions offered distance education courses, 18% of private for profit 2-year institutions offered distance education courses, 89% of public four-year institutions offered distance education courses, 53% of private not for profit 4-year institutions, and 70% of private for profit institutions offered distance education courses (NCES, 2008). It is evident from these statistics that almost all 2-year public institutions offered distance education courses. Because community colleges are the largest provider of online courses, participants for this study were recruited from community colleges.

**History of Distance Education**

Distance education can trace its beginning back to 1840 when Sir Isaac Pitman in London, England developed a shorthand correspondence course (Birnbaum, 2001). In the United States, distance education traces its roots to the late 1800s. In 1874, Illinois Wesleyan University began to offer correspondence courses, which, coupled with traditional classroom courses, could lead to both undergraduate and graduate degrees (Berg, 2002; California Distance Learning Project, n.d.). In 1882, the state of New York recognized and awarded college credit for correspondence courses taken through the Chautauqua Institute (Berg, 2002). A decade later in 1892, the University of Chicago, Pennsylvania State College, and
the University of Wisconsin began offering correspondence courses (Pennsylvania State University, n.d.).

Up until the early 1900s, distance education was delivered via correspondence courses. As radio technology developed, distance education began being delivered via radio broadcasts. Between 1918 and 1946, 202 radio broadcasting licenses were granted to educational institutions (Berg, 2002). Pennsylvania State College (now University) was one such institution and began broadcasting courses in 1921 (Pennsylvania State University, n.d.). Radio broadcasting of courses gradually decreased and by the end of the 1940s had ceased to exist. Factors contributing to the end of the radio courses included limitations of the broadcast signal, rise of commercial radio networks, and minimal faculty involvement (Berg, 2002).

The next technological advancement to impact the delivery of distance education was the development of television. The first instructional television station began in 1953 at the University of Iowa (Berg, 2002). By the late 1950s and early 1960s television channels dedicated to instruction had been established in many American cities (Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001). While instructional television employed the latest technology, it was not until the development of interactive television in the 1990s that television as a distance education delivery method really took off (Mehrotra, Hollister, & McGahey, 2001). This was because interactive television allowed the instructor and students, who were in different locations, to see and speak with each other.

According to Mehrotra, Hollister, and McGahey (2001) the computer was the next technological advancement and to date, the most significant advancement in distance education. It is not only the invention of the computer that has and is revolutionizing
distance education, but the creation of the Internet and World Wide Web as well. These technological advances have allowed distance education courses to be delivered anywhere the student desires.

What is Known About Online Courses

A literature search using the keyword of online education illustrated that online education has been broadly studied and continues to be studied. The literature indicated numerous dimensions of online education have been examined. Studies have been conducted focusing on differences between online courses and face-to-face courses, quality in online courses (McGorry, 2003; Peltier, Schibrowsky, & Drago, 2007), characteristics of successful online students (Boyd, 2004; Schrumm & Hong, 2002; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004), persistence/attrition in online courses (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Kemp, 2002; Morgan & Tam, 1999), student perceptions of online courses (Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009; Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006; Howland & Moore, 2002), and a variety of other aspects of online education. For purposes for this study, student perceptions of online courses and characteristics of successful online students were examined.

Student Perceptions of Online Courses. A number of studies have been conducted to ascertain what perceptions and expectations students have regarding online courses. Dobbs, Waid, and del Carmen (2009) suggest that a student’s perception of online courses is based in part if they have taken an online course or have not taken an online course. Dobbs et al (2009) surveyed 180 students enrolled in face-to-face criminal justice courses and 100 students enrolled in online criminal justice courses at a large university located in the Southwest. For students who have not taken an online course, perceptions included: online courses do not cover course material in depth, online courses do not allow interaction with
classmates, and online courses are not quality courses. For students who have taken an
online course, perceptions included: online courses are more time intensive than face-to-face
courses, online courses take more effort to complete than face-to-face courses, and online
courses are quality courses.

Howland and Moore (2002) examined students’ experiences and perceptions of
online courses. Forty-eight online students enrolled in three graduate level courses were
surveyed regarding their online experience. Study participants reported “that their initial
perceptions of online courses were quite different from what they experienced” (p. 190).
Participants indicated they thought “they would be setting their own schedules, working
individually, and turning in assignments only by the end of the course” (p. 190). In reality,
participants engaged in group projects and course assignments had structured due dates.

In another study, Bambara, Harbour, Gray Davies, and Athey (2009) interviewed 13
community college students enrolled in high risk online courses “to determine if participants
in such online courses shared a common experience that superseded their individual
successes or failures” (p. 220). One of the study’s findings was that participants had
“unrealistic expectations” regarding online courses. Specifically, participants thought online
courses would be easier than they were. Participants also commented there was a lack of
student-instructor interaction which they did not anticipate.

Lastly, Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw (2006) sought to better understand the expectations
and needs of undergraduate students enrolled in industrial education courses. The
researchers simply posed an open-ended question asking participants what their expectations
and needs as online students were. The top three expectations of online students included: 1)
communication with the professor, 2) instructor feedback, and 3) challenging online courses.
The top four needs of online students included: 1) technical help, 2) flexible understanding instructors, 3) advance course information, and 4) sample assignments.

As these studies suggest students hold a number of perceptions and expectations when it comes to online courses. One of the most commonly held perceptions is that online courses are easier and do not require as much effort as face-to-face courses do. Students also expect to have similar types of interaction with online instructors as they do with face-to-face instructors. It is not uncommon after students experience online courses to realize that the perceptions they held about online courses.

**Characteristics of Successful Online Students.** As more people are enrolling in online courses, studies focusing on what makes an individual a successful online student have been conducted. Schrum and Hong (2002) surveyed online educators to ascertain what characteristics are needed for students to be successful in online courses. Schrum and Hong administered a self-designed survey to 14 online educators in which participants were asked to review factors, which according to relevant literature regarding online education, contribute to online student success. Participants were asked to answer three questions about each factor using a Likert-type scale. Findings indicated the following factors impact the success of online students: 1) access to necessary technology, 2) experience using technology (e.g. checking e-mail, attaching documents, etc.), 3) awareness of preferred learning preferences, 4) awareness of life circumstances and/or multiple roles, 5) self motivation, and 6) self discipline.

Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) surveyed 76 graduate students enrolled at a research university in the South to determine characteristics of successful online students. In addition, 14 of the participants volunteered to participate in a follow-up interview. However,
only nine of the 14 participants were interviewed as the remaining five participants had scheduling conflicts. Study results indicated that “design of the online course is the most important factor, followed by being comfortable with the technology. Motivation and time management were ranked third and fourth in terms of level of importance in what makes a learner successful in an online course” (p. 65).

Brinkerhoff and Koroghlanian (2007) suggest that for online students to be successful, online courses need to be designed in ways that foster online student success. They surveyed 249 college students enrolled at 13 institutions located throughout the United States to ascertain “what online course features are most desired by students and what online course features are used in the courses they are enrolled in” (p. 384). The survey was administered electronically and consisted of 55 items using either a Likert-type scale or yes/no scale to measure what online course features are preferred and what online course features are used in class. Participants reported desiring the use of the following course features: 1) e-mail communication with the instructor, 2) online grade book, 3) instructor feedback while working on assignments, and 4) instructor feedback after completion of assignments (p. 386). Further, participants reported not preferring the use of the following course features: 1) a face-to-face meeting at the beginning of the course, 2) a scheduled weekly time for synchronous communication, 3) threaded discussions with a rotating student moderator, 4) team assignments, and 5) a biography page for each student (p. 386). After statistical data analysis, three course features were discovered “to be desired by participants to a greater degree than their online courses provided” (p. 387). The three course features included: 1) step-by-step instructions and guides, 2) a scheduled weekly time for synchronous communications, and 3) instant messaging (p. 387).
As the studies above suggest, to be a successful online student not only requires embodiment of particular characteristics but success in online courses is also dependent upon course design.

**What is Known About Women and Online Courses**

A review of the literature proved to point to the paucity of research when combining women and online education. This yield is understandable when one considers how ‘young’ online education is. Because online education is ‘young’, studies conducted have focused primarily on online education in general—without any emphasis on or disaggregating by gender. The review of literature did, however, yield studies that have been conducted which focused on gender, but these were much fewer in number. One report, *The Third Shift: Women Learning Online* (Kramarae, 2001), intentionally examined women and online education and did so because “women are the primary users of online education” (p. 5), because women “are targeted as a primary constituency for online learning” (p. 5), and “to remedy the lack of attention paid to women’s interests and involvement with online education” (p. 5). Further, the report, as suggested by its title, posited that the pursuit of education has become a “third shift” for women. Arlie Hochschild (1989) first introduced the shift metaphor in her study of work and family conflicts. According to Hochschild (1989) “most women work one shift at the office or factory and a second shift at home” by taking care of the family and home (p. 4). *The Third Shift: Women Learning Online* (Kramarae, 2001) takes the shift metaphor one step further by suggesting a woman’s quest for education is her “third shift”—what she does after working and taking care of family and home. The very nature of the term “third shift” implies working overnight. Taken together, the implication is that online education is most conducive for women to pursue this third shift.
To this end, Cheris Kramarae (2001), author of the report, gathered information from 534 individuals (481 women and 53 men) through the use of an online questionnaire, face-to-face interviews, and focus groups to “understand why women pursued online education, what constraints they may face in doing so, and how they perceive online culture, social identity, and communication” (p. 4-5). Findings included: 1) women enrolled in online courses for a variety of reasons including working towards a degree, career advancement, and life-long learning; 2) women identified flexibility, the ability to learn at one’s own pace, and minimizing costs (i.e., child care, commuting) as reasons for preferring online courses; and 3) women identified several obstacles to participating in online courses. Obstacles identified included: costs (not only tuition costs which may be higher due to deliver fees for online courses, but computer related costs as well), time demands due to family and work, and family concerns/issues (not having family support, feeling guilty when online and/or doing homework rather than being with family).

Of the other studies conducted that focused on gender, research has focused on performance/perceived learning (Arbaugh, 2000; Lu, Yu, & Liu, 2003; Price, 2006; Rovair & Baker, 2005), communication patterns (Barrett & Lally, 1998; Blum, 1999; Lee, 2002; Rovair & Baker, 2005), participation patterns (Arbaugh, 2000; Blum, 1999), and persistence/attrition (Muller, 2008). Results from the studies have been mixed. That is, some studies suggested women experience online courses positively while other studies suggested women experience online courses negatively and yet other studies suggested no difference in how men and women experience online courses. An overview of the study categories mentioned above (class performance/perceived learning, communication patterns, participation patterns, and persistence/attrition) is provided below.
Class performance/perceived learning. The aspect of class performance/perceived learning is one area that has garnered mixed results. Some researchers (Price, 2006; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai & Baker, 2005) indicated that women perform better and perceive high levels of learning while other researchers (Arbaugh, 2000; Lu, Yu, & Liu, 2002) suggested that there are no gender differences in online class performance. Price’s (2006) study examined gender differences in an undergraduate course delivered both face-to-face and online, which allowed for any differences discovered to be attributed to gender and “media effects.” Price examined data from three years consisting of course completion rates, course pass rates, and assignment and examination scores. Price found that “women were more likely than men to complete the online course and twice as likely to pass the online version” (p. 353). In addition, women in the online course received higher scores than men.

Related to class performance is perceived learning. If students are performing well in class as evident by good/high grades, then it can be assumed that students will perceive they are learning. It is this focus on perceived learning that Rovai and Baker (2005) examined. Rovai and Baker administered a survey to 281 graduate students which asked students to self report on their learning. Results indicated that women perceived they learned more than their male counterparts. In contrast, Arbaugh (2000) and Lu, Yu, and Liu (2002) suggested that gender does not impact performance in class.

Communication and Participation Patterns. Studies (Arbaugh, 2000; Barrett & Lally, 1999; Blum, 1999; Lee, 2002; Rovair & Baker, 2005) have been conducted focusing on gender and both communication and participation patterns in online courses. This has been an area of interest because of existing research in the face-to-face environment, which suggested women do not communicate and participate in class. By researching
communication and participation patterns in online courses, researchers can determine if it is a function of gender or a function of class environment/climate that impacts/influences women’s communication and participation patterns.

Both Arbaugh (2000) and Rovai and Baker (2005) found that women participated more in online courses than male students as measured by the number of messages/posting made in the course. Contrastingly, Barrett and Lally (1999) as did Lee (2002) found that men participate more in the online environment than women. The difference in findings could be a cultural difference as Arbuagh (2000) and Rovai and Baker’s (2005) studies focused on American online students, while Barrett and Lally (1999) studied British online students, and Lee (2002) studied Korean online students.

Communication patterns are different between men and women in online courses. Both Barrett and Lally (1999) and Blum (1999) found that women’s communication in online courses were different that men’s communication. Blum (1999) found that women communicate in an “elegant way” and in ways “striving to help others” (Para 14) whereas men were generally “rough” in their communication. Blum (1999) also found that women communicated in a personal manner whereas men did not. Barrett and Lally (1999) indicated in their study it was the men who communicated in a personal manner and not the women. Blum (1999) also found that when men dominated an online discussion, women did not participate in the discussion, and it would take days before women inserted themselves into the discussion. Lee (2002) had similar findings as she found women were discouraged from posting opinions and feedback.

**Persistence/Attrition.** One study, conducted by Muller (2008), which specifically focused on women and persistence in an online degree completion program, was found. The
study examined 20 women (nine undergraduate and 11 graduate students) enrolled in an online degree course completion program at a northeastern college. This online degree completion program is specifically designed for students who work full-time. Muller conducted phone interviews to determine why women persisted in online courses and why they did not persist in online courses. Muller identified the following factors as why participants persisted: engagement in the learning community, support from faculty and classmates, and convenience and flexibility of online courses. Factors contributing to participant attrition included: balancing multiple roles and insufficient interaction with faculty members.

It is clear that studies intentionally focusing on women and online education need to be conducted. The research that does exist on women and online education is thin. In addition, the existing research is contradictory and warrants further studies to be conducted.

**Rural Education**

Rural education is difficult to define as the term ‘rural’ does not have a universally agreed upon definition (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Provasnik et al., 2007). Various federal agencies employ a different definition for rural. The U. S. Census Bureau, the White House’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (ERS) are three federal agencies whose definition of rural is commonly used (Reynells, 2008). Each agency employs different criteria, which informs different classification systems from which rural is defined. The definition of rural as defined by the three federal agencies is provided below.

The U. S. Census Bureau defines rural as:
“Rural” encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area. An urban area will compromise a densely settled core of census tracts and/or census blocks that meet minimum population density requirements, along with adjacent territory containing non-residential urban land uses as well as territory with low population density included to link outlying densely settled territory with the densely settled core. To qualify as an urban area, the territory identified according to criteria must encompass at least 2,500 people, at least 1,500 which reside outside institutional group quarters. The Census Bureau identifies two types of urban areas: 1) Urbanized areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people and 2) Urban Clusters (UCs) of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, Para 2)

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines metropolitan statistical areas and micropolitan statistical areas—which are collectively referred to as Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs). A metropolitan statistical area is “an area containing a large population nucleus and adjacent communities that have a high degree of integration with that nucleus (OMB, 2010, p. 37246). A micropolitan statistical area is an area with a smaller nucleus than a metropolitan nucleus (OMB, 2010). The purpose of metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas is to “provide a nationally consistent set of delineations for collecting, tabulating, and publishing Federal statistics for geographic areas” (OMB, 2010, p. 37246). Interestingly, OMB does not specifically define rural and quite clearly states, “the metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas do not produce an urban-rural classification (OMB, 2010, p. 37246), yet OMB is thought to have a definition for rural.

The Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (ERS) has nine definitions for rural. Six of the nine definitions are based on U.S. Census Bureau definitions,
one is based on an OMB definition for metropolitan, and two are based on ERS definitions.

The nine definitions are listed in the following table:

### Table 1

**Economic Research Service Definition for Rural**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural Definition #1</td>
<td>All areas outside Census places with 2,500 people or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Definition #2</td>
<td>All areas outside Census places with 10,000 or more people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Definition #3</td>
<td>All areas outside Census places with 50,000 or more people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Definition #4</td>
<td>All areas outside urban areas. This places the upper limit of rural at 2,500, since urban areas must have at least 2,500 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Definition #5</td>
<td>All areas outside urban areas with 10,000 or more people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Definition #6</td>
<td>All areas outside urban areas with 50,000 or more people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Definition #7</td>
<td>All counties outside metropolitan areas in 2003 (based on 2000 census data)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Definition #8</td>
<td>Census tracts with 2000 RUCA codes 4 through 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Definition #9</td>
<td>Locations outside places of 50,000 or more people and their associated urbanized areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service
Rural Definitions: Data Documentation and Methods
September 4, 2007

Given all these definitions for rural, it quickly becomes evident how difficult it is to define, report, and evaluate rural education. In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), “the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education in the U.S. and other nations” (NCES, n.d.), released a new classification system for classifying schools as being city, suburban, town, and rural (Provasnik, et al., 2007). NCES released its new classification system to allow for a more precise classification of schools to occur. The new classification system is based on an institution’s physical longitude and latitude (Provasnik et al., 2007). The new classification system consists of four primary categories—city, suburban, town, and rural. Each primary category is
comprised of three sub-categories. For the categories of city and suburban, the three sub-categories include large, midsize, and small. For the town and rural categories, the three sub-categories include fringe, distant, and remote. Table 2 contains the new classification system.

Table 2

NCES’s urban-centric locale categories, released in 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locale</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>City</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midsize</td>
<td>Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Territory inside and urbanized area and inside a principal city population less than 100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suburban</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midsize</td>
<td>Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Town</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fringe</td>
<td>Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urbanized area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because the NCES classification system provides a more precise and accurate categorizing of institutions, I utilized their definition for rural institutions and used this definition to determine which ICCOC institutions are categorized as rural institutions.

Using this new classification system for schools, NCES released a report in 2007 titled *Status of Education in Rural America*. The report provided a comprehensive examination of education in rural America. While the report primarily focused on K-12 schools there were several findings pertaining to higher education, including:

- College enrollment rates for both 18-24 year olds and 25-29 year olds were generally lower in rural areas than in all other locale in 2004 (p. v).

- The percentage of adults with a bachelor’s degree as their highest educational attainment in 2004 was lower in rural areas (13%) than the national percentage (17%; p. v).

- In rural areas, the ranking of parental expectations mirrored the national rates: the largest percentage of students had parents who expected their child to complete a bachelor’s degree (37%), followed by a graduate or professional degree (21%), 2 years or more of college (20%), a high school diploma (11%), and attendance at a vocational or technical school (10%; p. 42).

- A greater percentage of students in rural areas had parents who reported expecting their child to complete high school as their highest level of educational attainment (11%) than students in cities (8%) or suburban areas (5%). This pattern was also true among students with parents who reported expecting their child’s highest attainment to be two or more years of college (20% for rural vs. 15% and 13% for
cities and suburban areas, respectively) or attendance at a vocational or technical school (10% vs. 7% and 6% respectively; p. 42).

- In rural areas as in the nation as a whole, females enrolled in postsecondary education at a higher rate than males (p. 64).

These findings suggest that rural students are less likely to attend college and those rural students who do attend college are more likely to be women. These findings coupled with what is known about adult college women and online education warrant further investigation into the educational experiences of rural women as online students.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Two theoretical frameworks were utilized in this research study. The first, feminist standpoint theory served to both frame and guide the study. The second, identity theory, was employed to understand study findings. Each theory is described below.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) served as the guiding theoretical framework for this study. FST emerged as an alternative theory to answer the following questions: 1) What is the nature of knowledge? and 2) How is knowledge produced? Historically, knowledge has been seen as being objective, neutral, and singular—meaning there is only one knowledge and it is applicable to all. Knowledge, historically, was also both produced by only men and accessible to only men. The advent of FST in the 1970s and 1980s challenged both how knowledge was understood and how knowledge was produced (Harding, 2004)

FST specifically focuses on women’s experiences and believes examining women’s lives and their experiences is necessary for a more complete and accurate understanding of the world. FST posits that knowledge is socially situated (Harding, 1993/2004). That is,
knowledge is based on one’s social location (Harding, 1993/2004). Social location “refers to a person’s position (and the intersection of positions) where race, class, gender, and other constantly shifting social group formations that exist within a network of political and economic power relations, define position” (Zaytoun, 2006, pg. 69). One’s social location impacts/influences how one interacts with and experiences the world and how the world interacts with and experiences them. FST asserts that those who are marginalized, oppressed, and dominated have a more complete understanding of the world (Harding) which results from a “double vision” or “double consciousness” that those who are marginalized develop (Brooks, 2007). Double consciousness can be described as “a heightened awareness not only of their lives but of the lives of the dominant group as well” (Brooks, 2007, p. 63). FST specifically focuses on women as women have historically been marginalized. Thus, examining women’s lives achieves not only a more accurate understanding of the world, but “succeeds in constructing knowledge that accurately reflects and represents women” (Brooks, 2007, p. 56).

FST was selected as a theoretical framework because its tenets align with this study. One tenet of FST is the importance of intentionally focusing on women and women’s experiences (Harding, 1991). FST espouses it is vital to put women’s lives at the center of research. Doing so not only brings knowledge about women to the forefront, but also brings knowledge about the broader society in general. Similarly, this research study is intentionally designed to focus on women and their experience as online students. Focusing on women not only will provide valuable information for how women experience online courses, but also will provide broad societal insight. A second FST tenet recognizes that social location impacts/influences how one experiences the world and how the world
interacts with the individual (Harding, 1991). One’s social location determines how that individual knows and makes sense of the world. This study purposefully examined the social location indicator of gender by focusing on women.

It is important to note that while FST rightfully acknowledges women’s experiences and the location from which they experience life from is crucial to gain a more complete and fuller understanding of the world, there are two pitfalls of which feminist standpoint theorists need to be cognizant. The two pitfalls are essentialism and relativism. Essentialism refers to taking the commonalities of women’s experience(s) and universalizing that commonality to all women (Smith, 1997). Brooks (2007) defined essentialism as reducing “all women to a group sharing one experience, and a single point of view, or standpoint, based on that experience” (p. 70). Feminist standpoint theorists recognize that “all women are different from each other and each woman has multiple (or fractured) identities, any one of which might arguably provide a standpoint for knowledge” (Letherby, 2003, p. 47). With this understanding of essentialism, I need to be cognizant that I neither “reduce” the women participating in this study nor universalize their experience to other women enrolled in asynchronous online courses. While there may be commonalities, no two women will have the same experience of or perspective of what it means to be an online student. Likewise, I need to recognize data that might seem to be an outlier “could provide a standpoint for knowledge” (Letherby, 2003, p. 47). Related, it is equally important for feminist standpoint theorists not to succumb to the belief/perception that social change is not possible due to the diverse/divergent voices/experiences women have, which is the crux of relativism. Relativism recognizes multiple perspectives and voices. The challenge, for the feminist
standpoint theorist becomes how to foster social change while acknowledging the diverse experiences women have.

**Identity Theory**

Sheldon Stryker, a sociologist at Indiana University Bloomington, formally introduced identity theory in 1966 at the yearly American Sociology Association meeting (Stryker & Burke, 2000). While Stryker was the first researcher to formally present identity theory, he was not the only researcher developing identity theory and its concepts. George McCall and J. L. Simmons are two other originators of identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Peter Burke is a third researcher who is also associated with identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009). Each of these researchers has focused on different aspects of identity theory. For purposes of this dissertation, Sheldon Stryker’s (1968) work on identity theory was used and is described below.

Identity theory, which grew out of structural symbolic interaction, explains the relationship between one’s identity and one’s behavior. Identity is defined as, “meanings attached to the self by self and others” (Gecas & Burke, 1995, p. 42). To understand identity theory it is necessary to understand structural symbolic interaction as structural symbolic interaction premises serve as the foundational basis for identity theory. The first premise is that the self “is the individual viewed as both the source and the object of reflective behavior” (DeLamater & Myers, 2011, p. 67). This means the self is both active and passive or as Burke and Stets (2009) said, “the self is able to be both subject and object” (p. 9). The self is active or “subject” when it enacts a behavior. The self is passive or “object” when “we think about who we are” (DeLamater & Myers, 2011, p. 112). The second premise is that society is structured and organized (Burke & Stets, 2009). Society’s structure and
organization can be seen in the systems, groups, networks, and communities that exist in society (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Echoing the premises of structural symbolic interaction, identity theorists believe, “society is patterned and organized, and the self emerges within the context of a complex organized society. If society is organized so too must the self be organized” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 37). Complexity in the self is manifested through multiple roles individuals hold. For each role a person holds there is a corresponding identity. Role identities “are meanings one attributes to oneself in a role and that other attribute to one” (Burke & Reitzes, 1981, p. 84). To illustrate, the role of parent has a corresponding parent identity and that parent identity has commonly shared societal meanings such as being a caregiver, a protector, and a role model.

A person’s role identities are organized into a salience hierarchy (Stryker, 1968). A salient identity is an identity that is most likely to be activated or enacted across various situations (Stryker, 1968). Identity salience is influenced by how committed or not one is to the role identity (Stryker, 1980/2002). The more committed one is to a role identity, the more salient the role identity. Likewise, the less committed one is to a role identity the less salient the role identity. Two forms of commitment, interactional commitment and affective commitment are used to ascertain/determine degree/level of commitment to an identity (Stryker, 2007). Interactional commitment or extensivity of commitment “refers to the number of relationships entailed in having a given identity and by the ties among networks of relationships” (Stryker, 2007, p. 1093). Affective commitment or intensity of commitment “refers to the depth of emotional attachment to particular sets of others in networks of
relationships” (Stryker, 2007, p. 1093). The greater the commitment to an identity, the more salient the identity and the more likely the identity will be enacted (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Role identity salience and commitment to role identities has been examined. Callero (1985) examined role identity salience, specifically blood donor role identity, and commitment to blood donor role identity. Callero surveyed 685 individuals on three measures as they relate to blood donor role identity including: 1) salience of the role identity, 2) commitment to the role identity, and 3) behavior of the role identity. Salience of the role identity was measured through two sets of survey items. In the first set, five survey items using a strongly agree/strongly disagree scale were used to ascertain the extent in which the role identity is part of the self. Survey items in this group included statements of: Blood donation is something I rarely even think about, I would feel a loss if I were forced to give up donating blood, I really don’t have any clear feelings about blood donation, for me being a blood donor means more than just donating blood, and blood donation is an important part of who I am. In the second set of survey items, respondents ranked seven identities according to importance of the identity to them and included such identities as work, family, politics, blood donor, and religion. Commitment to the role identity was measured through five survey items focusing on the number of relationships and depth of those relationships as a result of the blood donor role identity. Behavior of the blood donor role identity was measured by the number of blood donations made in a six-month period. Callero (1985) concluded “individuals with high blood donor role identity salience were found to be more likely to define themselves as a regular blood donor, have a great number of friendships linked to blood donation, and donate blood more often” (p. 213).
In another study, Nuttbrock and Freudiger (1991) examined the salience of the mothering role identity in first-time mothers and commitment to the mothering role. Nuttbrock and Freudiger surveyed 132 first time mothers on three measures as they relate to the mothering role identity. One measure, salience of the mothering role identity, was measured by asking respondents to what extent do they talk about their child and show pictures of their child at school, at work, and with friends. A second measure, commitment to the mothering role identity, was measured by respondents indicating to what extent relationships in their lives have changed as a result of having a child. A third measure, behavior of the mothering role identity, was measured through two sets of the survey items. The first set of items focused on the willingness of mothers to “perform the parenting role without assistance from others” (Nuttbrock & Freudiger, 1991, p. 149). The second set of survey items focused on the personal sacrifices mothers would make to raise their child. Nuttbrock and Freudiger found that the mothering role identity was a salient identity in that respondents did talk about and show photos of their child in multiple situations. Respondents were also committed to their mothering role identity, as they were willing to make sacrifices for their child and to be parents without assistance from others.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the relevant literature pertinent to this study. Topics examined in the literature review included: adult college students, rural education, a history of distance education, distance education demographics, what is known about online education, and what is known about women and online education, as well as brief overviews of feminist standpoint theory and identity theory. Reviewing the relevant literature indicated
there is a deficiency in the literature focusing on how adult college women enrolled in rural community colleges experience asynchronous online courses.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

To restate, the purpose of this study was to understand how adult women attending rural community colleges experience being an online student. The previous chapter anchors this study by providing a review of the literature, illustrating the paucity of research, and justifying the need for this study. Similarly, this chapter will anchor the implementation of the study by describing the methodology and methods employed. Specifically, this chapter provides information on the philosophical assumption undergirding this study, the research approach taken, the rationale for employing online research methods, participant selection process, data collection methods, analysis procedures, and steps to ensure trustworthiness.

Philosophical Assumptions

This study emerged from an epistemological perspective of constructivism. Espousing a constructivist perspective indicates how I, as the researcher, believe knowledge is constructed or known. Crotty (1998) defined constructivism as: “the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). Glesne (1999) quite simply described researchers with a constructivist perspective as being focused on “understanding and interpreting how various participants construct the world around them” (p. 5). With this understanding of constructivism, I believe that all individuals are capable of constructing knowledge. Knowledge is constructed through and as a result of our experiences—experiences with each other, experiences with systems and organizations, and experiences with the world. Because of this constructivist perspective, I believe interviewing
adult women on their experiences with asynchronous online courses is justified as knowledge.

**Research Approach**

The research approach taken for this study was qualitative in its nature and focus. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) defined qualitative research as:

Qualitative research is multimethod in its focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 2)

I chose a qualitative research approach for several reasons. First, I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of how adult women attending rural community colleges experience being an online student (Merriam, 2002). To accomplish this, interviewing adult rural women provided the in-depth understanding I sought much better than administering a survey would have provided. Second, as Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 120, as cited in Hoepfl, 1997) stated, “if you want people to understand better than they might otherwise, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it” (p. 49). Qualitative research reports are known to be “thick and rich with description” allowing the reader to understand the experience (Geertz, 1973). By choosing a qualitative research approach, I believe my study will assist people in understanding how adult rural women experience asynchronous online courses as they “hear” from the women themselves.

**Methodology**

Phenomenology was the methodological framework/perspective guiding this study. Creswell and Maietta (2002) indicated “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for
several individuals of the lived experiences surrounding a concept or phenomenon” (p. 151). Merriam (2002) echoed this saying “a phenomenological study seeks to understand the essence or structure of a phenomenon” (p. 93). As my goal is to understand the phenomenon of how adult rural undergraduate women experience asynchronous online courses, phenomenology is an appropriate framework to use.

Creswell and Maietta (2002) outline eight steps for conducting a phenomenological study. The eight steps consist of:

1. “Identify a central phenomenon to study and study the ‘essence’ of the experience” (p. 153).

   In this case, the phenomenon to be studied was adult women enrolled in asynchronous online courses. My purpose in studying this phenomenon was to ascertain the essence of how adult women experience asynchronous online courses. That is, are there universal meanings or understandings of how adult women experience asynchronous online courses?

2. “Ask central research questions that focus on capturing this meaning” (p. 153).

   An interview guide focusing on how participants experience the phenomenon being studied was used. Questions included: 1) What factors motivated you to enroll in online courses? 2) Describe your experience as an online student. 3) How does being a woman impact your experience as an online student? 4) What does being an online student mean to you? 5) How did the experience of being an online student affect family, friends, and others? The complete interview guide is provided in Appendix B.

3. “Collect data primarily through interviews” (p. 153).
Data was collected by conducting interviews. When conducting phenomenological studies it is recommended that Seidman’s (2006) three interview series be employed. Further information on data collection procedures can be found on page 52 under the heading Data Collection Procedures.


While Creswell and Maietta (2002) recommend using steps identified by Moustakas (1994), I did not use Moustakas’ (1994) steps, but rather used data analysis steps outlined by Hycner (1999). A complete description of data analysis procedures can be found on page 54 under the heading Data Analysis.

5. “Reduce the numerous significant statements to units or themes” (p. 153).

This step occurred during data analysis when interview transcripts were read and coded for themes.

6. “Analyze the context in which the individuals experiences the meaning units or themes” (p. 153).

Context related questions were asked when interviewing participants. Answers to these questions provided an awareness and understanding of context. This was necessary in order for context to be analyzed. Context analysis is presented in Chapter 4.

7. “Reflect on personal experiences you have had with the phenomenon” (p. 153).

Creswell and Maietta (2002) indicated that not all phenomenological studies include this component, as researchers do not always have experience with the
phenomenon under study. I included this component in my study as I have had experience both as an online instructor and as an online student. My experience as an online student is limited, as I have only taken one online course, whereas my experience as an online instructor is greater, as I have been an online instructor for three years. Both experiences served as a point of reference for reflection.

8. “Write a detailed analysis of the “essence” of the experience for the participants” (p. 153).

Chapter 5 is devoted to this step. Chapter 5 describes the essence of how adult women attending rural community colleges experienced being an online student.

**Method in Action**

One characteristic of qualitative research is that research “is conducted in a natural setting and premised upon the uniqueness of the individual and his/her environment” (Trumbull, 2000, p. 79). As the phenomenon being studied was how adult women experience being an online student, the Internet/online world/virtual world was the natural setting, and the research was conducted accordingly. Flick (2002) posited, “the object under study is the determining factor choosing a method and not the other way around” (p. 5). In this case, the object under study was how adult women experience being an online student and as such online research methods were warranted. In keeping with this characteristic of qualitative research, online research methods were employed.

Use of online research methods, while not common, is growing. A search of the literature yielded multiple articles in which online research methods were employed (Fox,
Researchers (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Hunt & McHale, 2007; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Meho, 2006) who have used online research methods indicated several issues to be aware of when employing such methods, including research design issues, the development and establishment of rapport, technical issues, and research ethics. These issues exist because online research methods have neither been widely used nor have been systematically studied and as a result there is “little in the way of accepted or established methodological practice” (O’Connor, et al., p. 278). It is important for researchers to be aware of these issues and take them into consideration when determining if online research methods should be used. Below, I discuss each issue and how I addressed them in more detail.

One challenge when using online research methods centers on research design. When designing a research study using online research methods, the researcher needs to consider how participants will be recruited (through websites, discussion boards, or traditional means), if participants have access to the technology needed to participate in an online study, and if training or tutorials are needed to bring participants up to speed so they can access and use the online method in order to participate in the study. Related, the interview design of an online study poses challenges as well. For example, researchers need to decide how the online interview will be conducted. Will interview questions be delivered all at once—in one e-mail? Will interview questions be delivered in ‘chunks’ in multiple e-mails? What is the
timeline for when participants need to respond to questions? How will the participant indicate they are withdrawing from the study? As evident by these questions, the use of online research methods require the researcher to think through all details related to design and implementation. As this study focused on how adult women experience being an online student, some of these questions have been answered by the nature of the study. That is, I was confident that participants had access to the needed technology to participate in this study, as it is the same technology needed for their online courses. I was also confident that participants had the skill necessary to use the technology because of their experience with it in their online courses. In terms of interview design, the concept of Seidman’s (2006) three interview series was used, but interview questions were delivered in chunks through multiple e-mails. Doing so made the interview process more manageable and minimized receiving overwhelming long e-mails. This means the three interview series concept was delivered by means of five e-mails. Participants were asked to reply within one week of receiving interview questions. A reminder was sent if a response was not received within one week. After receiving responses, the next set of questions, including any follow-up/probe questions were sent three days after receiving responses. Withdrawal from the study was indicated by not responding to the reminder e-mail sent when responses to interview questions were not received in five days.

A second challenge consists of the development and/or establishment of rapport between researcher and participant when conducting online interviews. Typically rapport is developed through smiles, nods, verbal affirmations, and body language. In the online interview, there are no visual cues to assist in developing rapport, which makes developing rapport more challenging. McCoyd and Kerson (2006) suggested the use of emoticons (e.g.
smiley faces, frowny faces, etc.) as a means to assist in building rapport. Walther, Anderson, and Park (1994 as cited in Meho, 2006) suggested the use of capitalization or underlining when sending e-mails can assist in building rapport as can the use of abbreviations commonly used in e-mail, such as LOL and OMG. Further, Kivits (2005 as cited in O’Connor, et al., 2008) suggested the researcher share personal information and include ‘small talk’ comments when exchanging e-mails with participants. To that end, I did incorporate small talk comments into e-mails and used emoticons and other commonly used techniques in e-mails to convey personality, emotion, and feeling. Participants were also encouraged to use such techniques as well and several did.

A third challenge focuses on the very essence of the online interview—the technology itself. Just as technical difficulties may arise when recording face-to-face interviews, so too may technical difficulties arise when conducting online interviews. Difficulties may include: unreliable or inconsistent access to the internet, undeliverable messages due to busy servers or incorrect e-mail addresses, deactivated websites which may at one time have hosted information participants need to access for the interview. Because this study focused on asynchronous online students, I was not too worried about unreliable or inconsistent access to the Internet because online students need to have reliable and consistent Internet access or they would not be online students. I also was not worried about incorrect e-mail addresses, as institutions provided e-mail addresses of prospective participants. This study did not involve accessing or utilizing websites so the issue of deactivated websites was not a concern.

A fourth challenge is that of research ethics. Ethics are important in all research, but particularly in research using new or uncommonly used methods. When using online
methods, issues of data protection, ensuring participant confidentiality, and gaining informed consent are common concerns. Data collected through online means has the potential to be intercepted/seen by others (i.e., hacking, chat room participants sharing chat transcripts with others outside of study, etc.), so care must be taken to protect data. Interview questions were sent from my Iowa State University e-mail account as Iowa State’s network is secure and has the necessary firewalls and other protective measures in place. Once responses were received from participants, a hard copy of the responses was printed off, placed in a binder, and said binder was kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home. The electronic copy was stripped of identifying information and transferred to a designated electronic folder. The original e-mail was then deleted as was the delete box. Participant confidentiality was ensured by not sending out mass e-mails to participants. Informed consent was facilitated through e-mail as well. Participants gave consent by typing/writing the following statement: I have read the informed consent form and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time with no negative effects. My responses confirm my ongoing consent.

Participants Reaction to Method

The decision to employ online research methods was a sound decision as evidenced by participant’s comments regarding the online interviewing process. All ten participants commented they either would not or probably would not have participated in this research study if face-to-face interviews had been employed. Lack of time coupled with busy, full schedules were the most cited reasons as to why participants would not have participated in a face-to-face research study. Sarah summed it up best when she said,
If this would have been a face-to-face interview I probably wouldn’t have participated. First and foremost, because it would have been impossible to schedule a time to actually do the interview. I can hardly schedule necessary appointments with my busy schedule.

Jennifer stated, “If this was face-to-face, I don’t think I would’ve done it. My schedule is chaotic at best, and I doubt that I would have had the time, energy, or patience to really do you any good at all.” Amy simply said, “I would not have participated. I wouldn’t have the time.”

Participants also indicated they liked the online interviewing process for several reasons. First, online interviewing allowed participants to engage with the interview questions when it worked best for their schedules. Second, online interviewing allowed participants to process and think about the interview question—without the added pressure of an interviewer sitting right there. Third, online interviewing allowed participants to be more forthcoming in their responses. Fourth, online interviewing allowed participants who are shy or nervous around people an opportunity to participate without fear of how they may be perceived.

Renee particularly appreciated that she could respond to the interview questions when it worked best for her schedule. She said,

I thought that it was really nice to do it online because, I am able to do it on my own time and when it works for me. It wasn’t time-consuming & I liked that I could do it when it was convenient for me. Overall, it probably took the same amount of time as a face-to-face interview might have taken, but the questions spread out over many weeks was also very helpful.
Debra also appreciated that she could answer interview questions when it worked for her schedule. She commented, “It was great that I could fit the interview into my schedule and respond when it was easy for me.”

Erin not only appreciated that interview questions could be answered according to her schedule but that she also had time to think about the questions before she responded. She pointed out,

*The two main good things about online interviewing is: 1) having time to schedule answering the questions into my schedule and 2) having time to think out the questions before i send my responses. Maybe more thought put into them.*

Likewise, Erika found that online interviewing allowed her time to think about the interview questions before she responded. She shared,

*I personally enjoy the online interview process. I enjoy having time to think about my reply so it is as genuine and thorough as possible. The online [interviewing] process may not allow for facial expressions and body language, but does allow for time to absorb the questions asked.*

Cindy and Tracy both commented that they online interviewing allowed them to be more forthcoming in their responses. Tracy shared,

*I liked that I was able to do the interview online. It was easier and less stressful to do it this way. I’m kinda shy when I first meet someone and I don’t know that I would’ve answered the questions the same way, or as truthfully as I did. I was able to think about my responses completely and could word them in a way that made it easier to describe what I was saying.*
Cindy simply stated, “I also feel that I might have been more open and honest with my answers that if it [interviewing] would have been face-to-face.”

**Participants**

Phenomenological studies require that participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Polkinghorne, 1989). For purposes of this study, participants needed to meet the following criteria: 1) female, 2) 25 years of age or older, and 3) have completed a minimum of three online courses.

Participants were recruited from two selected Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCOC) institutions. The Iowa Community College Online Consortium consists of seven community colleges all that deliver online courses through the consortium. The consortium provides coordinated and comprehensive support to faculty who teach and students enrolled in consortium courses (Iowa Community College Online Consortium, n.d.). The seven community colleges include: Eastern Iowa Community College, Iowa Lakes Community College, Iowa Western Community College, Northwest Iowa Community College, Southeastern Community College, Southwestern Community College, and Western Iowa Tech Community College. Two consortium community colleges are classified as rural institutions by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and participants were recruited from these institutions. The two community colleges are: Northwest Iowa Community College and Southwestern Community College. E-mail addresses for students meeting the study’s criteria were acquired from the respective institutions.

**Participant Recruitment**

Recruitment e-mails were sent to prospective participants in November 2011 (see Appendix A). Twenty-three women expressed interest in participating in the research study.
All 23 women were sent an informed consent form (see Appendix B). Of these 23 women, 18 returned the informed consent form. Of the 18 women who consented to participate in the research study, 10 completed all five interviews. Of the remaining eight women who did not complete all five interviews, two stopped after receiving the fourth set of interview questions, four stopped after receiving the third set of interview questions, and two stopped after receiving the first set of interview questions. It is possible that more women would have completed all five interviews had I not stopped the interview process. The interview process was concluded after four months. The eight remaining women received an e-mail informing them the interview process would be concluding, the date the interview process would be concluding, and asking for any interview responses to be submitted by the stated date. In my e-mail to the two participants who had received the fourth set of interview questions, I informed them they were very close to completing the interview series and encouraged them to return their responses.

A few women contacted me to inform me why they had either stopped participating in the study or why they had decided not to participate at all in the study. One woman initially expressed interest in participating in the study but shortly after expressing her interest she contacted me to tell me she was moving out of state and would not be able to participate in the study. A second woman, one who had received the first set of interview questions, informed me she had medical issues which prompted her to withdraw from school and because of her medical issues she would not be able to participate in the study. A third woman shared with me she was a gestational surrogate and wanted to make me aware if any issues arose with the pregnancy she may not be able to complete all the interviews. I did not receive interview responses from the third set of interview questions from this participant nor
any response from a follow-up e-mail and assumed she was experiencing pregnancy related issues.

The first woman to express interest in the research study did so one hour and twenty minutes after the recruitment e-mail was sent. The last woman to express an interest in participating in the research study did so one month after the recruitment e-mail was sent. The first participant to complete all five interviews did so in three and a half weeks. The last participant to complete all five interviews did so in fourteen weeks. Participant profiles are provided in Chapter 4.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Online interviews served as the data collection method.

**Interviews**

“We interview people to understand what life is like from perspectives other than our own” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87). This statement by Esterberg encapsulates why conducting interviews is the most commonly used method in qualitative research. It is through interviewing that the qualitative researcher begins to understand what life is like for others—namely participants who have experienced the phenomenon the researcher is studying. As the purpose of this study is to understand how adult women attending rural community colleges experience being an online student, interviewing will allow the women to tell their stories and describe their experience. It is through interviewing that an in-depth understanding of how adult women experience being an online student was gained.

A three interview series is recommended for phenomenological studies (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Seidman, 2006). A three interview series allows for in-depth understanding of phenomenon under study to occur. The first interview focuses on the participant’s life
history (Seidman, 2006). The second interview focuses on experiences with the phenomenon under study (Seidman, 2006). The third interview focuses on the meaning participants make of their experiences with the phenomenon under study (Seidman, 2006). The three interview series is commonly used in face-to-face interviews. As participants in this study were interviewed through online interviews, the three interview series was adapted to a five interview series.

**Interview Procedures/Protocol**

Participants received the first set of interview questions on the same day they returned their informed consent form (see Appendix C). The e-mail containing the first set of interview questions also included information to keep in mind when answering interview questions. For example, participants were told there were no right or wrong answers to interview questions, to use emoticons if they wished to, and to reply directly to the e-mail. Guidelines provided were similar in nature to guidelines an interviewer would provide at the beginning of a face-to-face interview.

Participants were asked to answer interview questions in one week. After receiving answers to that particular set of interview questions, the next set of interview questions was e-mailed three days later. Staggering interviews allowed me to read and process participant responses and formulate follow-up questions. Staggering interviews also gave participants a brief respite from the interview process. If a participant did not answer interview question in the allotted time fame a reminder e-mail was sent. Upon receipt of interview responses, participants received a receipt conformation e-mail informing them their answers had been received and the date in which the next set of interview questions would be sent. A calendar
was maintained in order to track when interview questions were sent, when reminders were
sent, and when the next set of interview questions were to be sent.

**Data Analysis**

Hycner (1999) identified procedural steps for analyzing phenomenological data. The
csteps include:

1. “Have a complete transcript of the interview” (p. 144).
   
   As interviews were conducted by employing online research methods, a
   verbatim transcript was already in existence.

2. “Bracketing and phenomenological reduction” (p. 144).
   
   Bracketing and reduction are key components in phenomenological research.
   Bracketing refers to putting aside or “bracketing” any preconceived notions,
   perspectives, thoughts, and opinions pertaining to the phenomenon under
   study. Doing so allows the researcher to be open to study participant’s
   perspectives and experiences.

3. “Listening to the interview for a sense of the whole” (p. 145).
   
   Interview transcripts were read multiple times to get a sense of the interview
   responses and understand the participant’s perspective and experiences.

4. “Delineating units of general meaning” (p. 145).
   
   Each interview was read carefully in order to understand the participant’s
   perspective and how she made meaning of the phenomenon. Any word or
   phrase that has meaning was noted. These notations were considered as units
   of general meaning.

5. “Delineating units of meaning to the research question” (p. 146).
The research question was applied to the units of general meaning generated in the above step to determine if the unit of general meaning answered or provided insight to the research question. Those units of general meaning that were relevant to the research question were known as units of relevant meaning.

6. “Training independent judges to verify the units of relevant meaning” (p. 149).

Hycner recommended that other researchers read and analyze the interview transcript to verify the findings of the primary/first researcher. Doing so contributes to the trustworthiness of the study. I did this with four interview transcripts.

7. “Eliminating redundancies” (p. 149).

Once units of relevant meaning were generated, those units were examined for redundancy or duplication. Redundancies were eliminated, which provided a list of units of relevant meaning that was concise and manageable.

8. “Clustering units of relevant meaning” (p. 150).

Once the units of relevant meanings were determined, these units were reviewed to determine similarity and/or connection to each other. Those units that were determined to have similarity were clustered together.


Once the clusters of meaning were determined, these clusters were reviewed to determine theme(s). Clusters needed to illustrate or give credence to identified themes.

10. “Writing a summary for each individual interview” (p. 153).
After interviews were conducted, coded, and emerging themes identified, I wrote a summary of the interviews. The summary also included rationale for themes and examples illustrating themes.

11. “Return to the participant with the summary and themes” (p. 154)

Participants were asked to read and review their interview summary and asked to make additions, clarification, and any comments. This step functioned as a member check.

12. “Modifying themes and summary” (p.154).

After participants reviewed their interview summary, it was possible that changes/revisions may be needed based on participant feedback. To date, no participant has contacted me with concerns about their interview summary.

13. “Identifying general and unique themes for all the interviews” (p. 154).

When all interviews were coded and themes identified, I looked for themes common in all interviews. I also looked for unique themes—themes that may have emerged from some of the participants but not all of the participants.


Providing context from which themes came from is important as it provides another layer in understanding participant experiences. Once themes were identified, I described the context in which the themes emerged.

15. “Composite summary” (p. 156).

Chapter 5 provides a detailed composite summary of the phenomenon being studied and how the participants live that phenomenon.
Trustworthiness

A key component of qualitative research is the concept of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness addresses the question of Why should I believe this study? Guba (1981 as cited in Shenton, 2004) lists four criteria that contribute to insuring a trustworthy study. The four criteria are: 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability, and 4) confirmability. Below, I describe each criterion in more detail and discuss how the criteria were addressed in this study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to “how to ensure rigor in the research process and communicate to others that we have done so” (Gasson, 2004, p. 95 as cited in Morrow, 2005, p. 252). There are a number of techniques available to assist in demonstrating credibility, including triangulation of data, member checks, researcher self-reflection, and peer review/consultation. For this study, I employed the use of member checks, researcher self-reflection, and peer review. Participants were asked to read and review their interview summaries and asked to make additions, clarification, and any comments. I sought peer review from two of my fellow doctoral students as a means to verify appropriate processes/actions and emerging themes. Further, I kept a research journal as a means to document my thoughts, any problems encountered, resolutions for said problems, and rationale for said resolution.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the transfer of findings to other situation and/or populations. The concept of transferability is a contested one in qualitative research, as some researchers believe that transferability is not possible due to the very nature of qualitative inquiry. Other
researchers believe that transferability can be fostered by researchers thoroughly describing participant demographics/background/selection process, methods employed, and study context—all of which provide sufficient information for the reader to determine if any of the findings are transferable to his or her situation. As transferability is ultimately up to the reader/other researcher, all I can do is thoroughly describe my study and all aspects of it—context, research design, participants, methods used, and findings. It is then up to the reader to determine if my findings are transferable to the situation in question.

**Dependability**

Dependability addresses the question of how dependable the findings are in a study. There is some thought (Lincoln & Guba as cited in Shenton, 2004) dependability is closely tied with the concept of credibility. Demonstrating credibility in essence is demonstrating dependability. Similar to steps taken to demonstrate credibility and transferability, researchers can thoroughly describe/discuss research design, participant demographics/background, methods employed, member checks, and maintaining a research journal/audit trail. For purposes of this study, dependability was demonstrated through thorough documentation and reporting of the research study, process, and findings.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to “the extent to which the characteristics of data, as posited by the researcher, can be confirmed by others who read or review the research results (Bradley, 1993, p. 437). Shenton (2004) further explained confirmability by stating, “steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work’s findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (p. 72). Such steps include keeping an audit trail. To that end, I kept an audit
trail outlining everything done in the course of the study and included rationale for why I choose to do what I did.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, this study focused on adult rural women in the Midwest and their experiences may or may not be similar to adult rural women in other geographical regions. Second, this study focused on asynchronous online courses. It is possible that enrollment in synchronous online courses or hybrid courses may yield different experiences. Third, this study employed online research methods and as a result may have attracted a particular type of participant as opposed to using face-to-face research methods. It is possible that this difference in participants may contribute to different experiences.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to understand how adult women attending rural community colleges experience being an online student. This chapter provided reason and rationale for why I selected the research approach I did, methodology employed, methods to be employed, and data analysis procedures. I also discussed how I addressed issues that commonly arise when using online research methods. Lastly, I discussed trustworthiness and what techniques were used to ensure trustworthiness.
CHAPTER 4. PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The purpose of this chapter is to provide information about the participants in the study. Study participants are introduced both as a group and individually. First, participants are introduced as a group utilizing a participant composite as well as a table. Second, participant profiles were developed to provide information about participants individually. These profiles present a snapshot of the participants and how they experience being an online student.

**Participant Composite**

Ten adult women enrolled in college courses participated in this study. Participants ranged in age from mid-twenties to early forties. Five participants were in their 20s, four were in their 30s, and one was in her 40s. Of the 10 participants, eight were married, one was divorced, and one was single. Only one of the participants did not have children. In terms of paid employment, four participants held full-time positions, four held part-time positions, and two did not work. The number of online courses participants completed ranged from three to 16 online courses. Eight of the 10 participants were enrolled in health programs, one was enrolled in a business program, and one was enrolled in an associate of arts program. Distance living from the community college ranged from five minutes away to three hours away.

Table 3 provides a description of each participant. Data in the table were self-reported. Participant profiles follow Table 3.
Table 3

Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th># of Online Courses</th>
<th>Distance from Community College</th>
<th>Program of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Mid Twenties</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3 hrs.</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>Late Twenties</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>40 min.</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>Early Thirties</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5 min.</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>Early Thirties</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30 min.</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Mid Twenties</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30 min.</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>Mid Twenties</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30 min.</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>Mid Twenties</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 min.</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meredith</td>
<td>Early Thirties</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20 min.</td>
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<td>Early Forties</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<td>90 min.</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Mid Thirties</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25 min.</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant Profiles

Amy

Amy is in her mid-twenties and took her first online course in 2004. By the end of fall semester 2011, she had completed five online courses. In addition to being a student, Amy works full-time, is married, and has two children—one who is five years old and one who is under one year old. Amy’s program of study is categorized as a health program by the community college she attends, and she lives three hours away from the community college she attends.
Amy is employed in the health field, and due to upcoming changes in the health industry, Amy’s job will change. In response to these upcoming changes, Amy wants to ensure her employability so she sought out an educational program that would provide her additional credentials. While this factor prompted Amy to explore appropriate educational programs, Amy had to find an educational program that allowed her to continue working full-time as well as allowed her to fulfill her responsibilities as a wife and mother. These factors prompted Amy to enroll in online courses. Amy shared,

*I have 2 small kids and a full time job so when I decided to go back to school I knew I wouldn’t be able to go the more traditional route. I’m a [job title] and with the implementing of [changes] my job will be so greatly changed in a few years that I knew I had to change sooner or later.*

Prior to enrolling in online courses, Amy was worried that adding the student role to her already existing roles of wife, mother, and employee would “*add a lot of stress*” to her life and as a result she would not be as successful in the classroom. Amy commented,

*I expected alot of stress and not really doing very well. I do get stressed but am doing better than I expected. I’m a very detail oriented person and I like having things done "my way". I thought I would lose my mind trying to keep up with things around the house and my job and school. I’ve just gotten used to not always having a clean house or the laundry not always being put away.*

Amy had some preconceived ideas regarding the rigor of online courses based on how course descriptions were worded. Amy stated,

*I expected some classes to be easier than they are and some to be harder than they are. It wasn’t so much the course names as it was the course description. I thought I*
was alot more skilled with computer programs than I really am and also thought that I would really struggle with [course name] but it turns out my job laid a good foundation for that course. Also, with the [specific] class I can bring certain things to my boss and supervisor if I'm having a hard time really understanding it and they have alot of helpful tips.

Amy indicated she has had a “positive” online student experience. She noted,

My experience as an online student is definitely positive. I'm learning alot and I know it's all stuff I can apply to future employment so that helps. It's hard balancing everything but I feel after a few weeks I found a good balance.

Amy commented that she does not perceive being a woman “has much impact” on her online student experience. She did, however, acknowledge that she has a personal expectation of fulfilling her multiple roles “perfectly.” She said,

I don't think being a woman has much impact. I think I put more pressure on myself than others do though. I expect better grades while still running a household and I know that I can't have both things "perfect" at the same time.

Amy fully recognized how her multiple roles as wife, mother, and employee impact her online student experience. Amy commented that she has to prioritize and compartmentalize her roles in order to fulfill them. She shared,

They [multiple roles] have a huge impact. There are nights I feel like I'm putting my family on the back burner or slacking on my schoolwork. I also get frustrated with my husband when he's not as cooperative as I want him to be. There isn't much impact with my job, I'm still able to get my work done but I do have to straighten my mind out and remind myself not to worry about school while working and not to worry
about work while I'm trying to read or study for school.

Amy’s geographical location factored into her decision to enroll in online courses. By enrolling in online courses, Amy does not need to drive three hours to attend class nor does she need to worry about childcare on the evenings and/or weekends her husband is called into work. Amy pointed out,

*I live in Iowa so it [geographical location] has a big impact. I really don’t want to be driving to or from class in a snow storm or freezing rain. My husband is an [utility company employee] so during bad weather he’s not home and I would have to find someone to take the kids for school. This way I don’t have to worry about all of that.*

Being an online student “*means a lot*” to Amy. Enrolling in online courses allowed Amy to both attain additional credentialing needed for employment and fulfill her multiple roles. Amy commented, “*It’s [being an online student] a great way to further myself without giving up a lot and having to move my family*”.

**Erika**

Erika is in her late twenties and took her first online course in 2010. By the end of fall semester 2011, she had completed 16 online courses. Erika is a single mother with two children—one who is eight years old and one who is four years old. Erika also takes care of her mother and grandmother and volunteers in her community. Erika’s program of study is a business program. She lives 40 minutes away from the community college she attends.

Erika enrolled in online courses because she needed an educational program that would allow her to fulfill her multiple roles as a mother, caregiver, and community volunteer. Erika’s motivation to pursue higher education is rooted in her desire not only to provide for her family but also to give them more than she had. Erika shared,
A little information about me will help you understand why I’m taking the online courses. I’m [late twenties] years old, and a single mother to two children (4 & 8). I take care of my grandma and my mother who both have health issues but are trying to stay in their own homes as long as possible. I do everything I possibly can to help them, and need to be available to them 24/7. I also volunteer [in the community]. I am enrolled in 5 online classes this semester also. If I took my classes traditionally I would not have time to do everything I do. My motivation is my family. I want to give my children more than I had. I want to be able to afford to send them to college right out of high school. I want them to have a yard to play in. I want a house that has room for my mother and grandmother for when they are not able to live alone any longer. My family is my driving force.

Prior to enrolling in online courses, several staff members informed Erika that online courses were time intensive and demanding. As a result, Erika anticipated she would need “to work her back side off” in order to be successful in her online courses. Erika stated,

"When I first started looking into online classes, various advisors told me the online courses were more difficult and more time consuming than face-to-face classes. With that, I was also told the average student spends about 10 hours per week per online course. Given that information I expected to work my backside off so I could succeed."

Since becoming an online student, Erika has found that online courses are time intensive and demanding just as she had expected. Erika described her schedule,

"I am working my backside off, or at least it feels like it! When family life is calm I schedule 60-70 hours per week for school work and studying. I’m currently in 5 classes so on average at least 12 hours a week is devoted to each class. When family..."
life becomes chaotic my "school hours" become more limited, as they have been the last week and a half. (My [family member] has a fractured rib and a compression fracture in her spine; [second family member] is meeting with the arterial surgeon next week to schedule a bypass in her legs, and be checked for an aortic aneurism). During this time I have only spent about 10 hours total on school work. I'm only allowed time to scan the chapters and my discussion postings revolve around what I've read from others' posts. This is not the way I like doing school, but my family is my priority.

Erika had not considered how being a woman impacted her experience as an online student but did comment, “I haven't seen any sexism in my classes.” Erika acknowledged that her multiple roles impact her online student experience. She explained,

Every role I play impacts my schooling. My partner has been in North Carolina for 9 months for work and is insanely busy so I drop everything when we get a chance to talk. I have stopped in the middle of time tests for a 15 minute conversation with him. My role as a mother has ensured that I don't get adequate sleep to sustain my memory so any complicated lessons I have to reread and take multiple notes on but it also is the force that sustains my will to continue in school. My [child] has begged me to drop out of school because [child] wants more play time with me, and I again explain how important school is, and then I take a "game break". I've learned to schedule one night a week of time just for the kids and myself to have fun together.

Erika perceives her geographical location as “one of the key factors” for enrolling in online courses. She explained,
My location is one of the key factors to me being an online student. There is not a college close enough for me to be willing to drive to everyday (especially in the winter), the only daycare in town is not one I feel comfortable sending my children to so I could be in a classroom after they got out of theirs, and [family member] condition has made it even more vital that I be close to her at all times.

Being an online student means a great deal to Erika. Enrolling in online courses allows Erika to pursue an education and ultimately attain a degree, which will allow Erika to improve her financial stability by being able to seek out better jobs. Enrolling in online courses also allowed Erika to fulfill her roles and responsibilities, which is of utmost importance to Erika.

Kimberly

Kimberly is in her late twenties and took her first online course in 2011. By the end of the fall semester 2011, she had completed six online courses. Kimberly works part-time, is married, and has one child who is seven years old. Kimberly’s program of study is categorized as a health program and is delivered entirely online. She lives five minutes away from the community college.

Kimberly’s decision to enroll in an online program was prompted by her multiple roles as wife, mother, and employee. Kimberly needed to enroll in an academic program that would allow her to continue working in the evenings and allow her to “focus” on her husband and child. These life circumstances coupled with Kimberly’s social anxiety prompted Kimberly to seek an online program of study. Kimberly reflected,

I work at a [business] in the evenings until about midnight and I have a [child] who is in elementary school. Since I try to focus on [child] and my husband while they are
home, I knew I wanted to do my schoolwork at night when they were sleeping. Since I can't go to class at 3 in the morning, I figured asynchronous online courses would be the best way to get my diploma. :) Plus I'm not a fan of social settings so this lets me interact with my "classmates" through discussion boards (which I definitely prefer) rather than face-to-face.

Prior to enrolling in online courses, Kimberly expected that online courses would be demanding and time intensive. This expectation was due in part to information community college staff members communicated to Kimberly. Kimberly was told that it was not recommended to enroll in this online health program and to have a full-time job due to the intensity of the program. Kimberly also expected “to work harder” in online courses as course instructors would not be physically present in class and as a result she would need to “teach” herself. Since becoming an online student, Kimberly has found that her online courses are demanding and time consuming just as she had expected. Even though Kimberly was told her online courses would be time consuming, she was not prepared for how demanding and time consuming her courses are. Kimberly described a typical week,

I usually get off work about 10 pm or 11. I start homework when I get home. I work on assignments, materials (although as long as I understand the materials they usually don’t take very long) and tests until about 7am. While my [child] gets ready for school I’m usually looking over the things I need to do next or finish what I was working on. I go to bed after I drop [child] off at school. I wake up about 1 pm and work on homework until I have to pick [child] up. I study notes and flash cards while I wait at school for [child]. I participate in discussions before/after work and while I am waiting at school or anytime I am sitting in my car (in addition to the ones I get
done while I’m doing homework). All of my classes vary from light to heavy assignments. It usually evens out pretty well and stays the same every week. There have been a couple of times where I had several classes that required more work all in one week (but thankfully it doesn't happen very often!).

Kimberly has been surprised by the amount of interaction she had with her classmates. While Kimberly anticipated online courses to incorporate class discussion, she anticipated a minimal amount of class discussions and class participation. She shared,

*I didn't actually expect so much interaction between the students but I have a couple of classes that require several discussions a week. I figured there would be a discussion or two every week (and in some classes there are) but in a couple classes we post two to four posts a week. The requirement for the math class (the class with the most requirements) is three posts a week and sometimes we do a lot more than that if we are really getting into a discussion. I didn't really expect people to go much beyond the requirements, but we do occasionally.*

Kimberly indicated she has had a “great” online student experience and is looking forward to her second semester of online courses.

Kimberly does not perceive being a woman as “having any bearing” on her online student experience. When asked if her multiple roles as wife, mother, and employee impact her online student experience, Kimberly commented that it is her student role that impacts her roles as wife, mother, and employee. She said,

*I actually think that it's the other way around. I think that being an online student has had an impact on my being a wife, mother, and employee. Because of the intensity of the program, school has had to come first and everyone else has sort of had to deal...*
with it. I feel like I have put my husband and son "on the back burner" so to speak. I always try to spend some time with them but it's not as much as it used to be.

Kimberly also does not perceive her geographical location as impacting her online student experience.

Enrolling in online courses made it possible for Kimberly to attain a degree and still be able to fulfill her multiple roles. Degree attainment is important to Kimberly, as it will allow her to secure a better job, which will financially benefit Kimberly and her family.

**Renee**

Renee is in her early thirties and took her first online course in 2010. By the end of fall semester 2011, she had completed four online courses. Renee works part-time, is married, and has two children—one who is six years old and one who is three years old. Renee’s program of study is categorized as a health program and she lives 30 minutes away from the community college.

Renee enrolled in online courses as a means to complete some of the pre-requisite courses needed for her program of study. At the same time Renee was enrolled in online courses, she was also enrolled in face-to-face courses. By enrolling in online courses, Renee was able to better manage her multiple roles as wife, mother, employee, and student.

Prior to enrolling in an online course, Renee thought that online courses would be self-paced in that she would have the entire semester to complete and submit course assignments and that online courses would be easier than face-to-face courses. Renee also anticipated she would need to teach herself the course material “to an extent” due to the nature of online courses. Renee commented,
I thought that the time-frame would be strictly my own and that I would have the whole semester to complete tests, quizzes, assignments whenever I wanted--which was not the case. I thought the classes would be easier--which they were in some cases; I had many tests that were not proctored. I expected that I would need to teach myself to an extent and to make myself physically sit down to study the material. I expected timely and appropriate feedback from my instructors. Overall, I thought it would be easier than taking face-to-face classes.

After becoming an online student Renee discovered that some of her perceptions regarding online courses were correct and some were not. Renee learned that online courses have due dates for assignments and she did not have the entire semester to complete assignments. Renee found that online courses that did not incorporate proctored tests were easier courses. For Renee, if a course did not include proctored tests she did not study the material as well as she did when tests were proctored. She reflected,

$I felt that I prepared more for my proctored tests than I did for my non proctored tests and quizzes. If I knew it wasn't proctored, I generally didn't put as much effort into studying to retain the material. Although, in hindsight, I should have prepared just as equally so that I would be able to maintain my knowledge base.$

Renee indicated she has had a “so-so” experience as an online student. This ambivalence is due in part to Renee having both favorable and unfavorable things to say about her online experience. Online courses allowed Renee to complete required courses for her program of study and provided the needed flexibility for Renee to fulfill her multiple roles, but she questions how much she has learned in her online courses. Renee explained,
My experience has been so-so. I say that because although I was able to fulfill my class requirements and credit hours needed for my current program, I don't feel that I learned as well if I had taken the classes face-to-face. This had nothing to do with the instructors. My experience seemed to be solely based on the amount of effort that I decided to put forth on my studies. I loved being able to take the classes online because of the ease of access, and also because that meant less time I had to physically be on the college campus or time I would have spent driving. I feel like I was able to manage my time more effectively because I could take my tests when I wanted—within a time frame, of course. The online courses fit better with my schedule at the time, but I don't feel I learned as much as I could have.

Renee started to question her learning in online courses as a result of an experience she had in a face-to-face course in which material from a previous online course was reviewed.

During the review Renee realized she “couldn’t go in depth on most things”. She explained,

Currently we are going through a [specific] chapter in one of our texts. One of our pre-reqs for our [program of study] was [specific class]—a class most of us took online. We had no proctored tests or quizzes. We did have weekly assignments that were graded as well as discussions and weekly quizzes. I don’t feel that I got as much out of that class as I would have had I taken it face-to-face. I remember a lot of the basic material, but I couldn’t go in depth on most things. I found that I didn’t retain the material as well as I should have. I also felt that it wasn’t as challenging as it could have been if it were face-to-face.
Renee sees being a woman and the multiple roles she holds as impacting her online student experience. Renee acknowledged that online courses allowed her to fulfill her multiple roles “to the best of her ability.” She commented,

*It was because of those roles that online classes fit the best for me. As a mother, I still had the time to spend with my children; I could pick my [child] up from school, attend [child’s] school functions. I felt that my role as a student didn't interfere with that of my children. As a spouse, I felt the same way. My husband was more than willing to accommodate my schedule. But taking online classes definitely allowed me to spend more time with him as well. I was still able to work full-time, which I loved. I felt a little more stressed, but that probably had to do more with taking classes in general than the fact that they were online classes. Overall, the online classes fit into my schedule very well and allowed me most of the flexibility I was looking for.*

As a result of balancing her multiple roles of wife, mother, employee, and student, Renee commented she felt empowered knowing she could manage all of her multiple roles. She said, “*I have to say though, that I did feel empowered—and still do—to know that I can handle all of those roles*”.

Renee’s geographical location contributed to her decision to enroll in online courses. At the time Renee was enrolled in online courses, gas prices were at an all-time high. By enrolling in online courses Renee did not have to worry about additional costs. She shared,

*I have to travel about 30 minutes one way to my college campus. Online classes were very appealing because of this. During my initial set of classes was when gas prices were extremely high. Knowing I would have to pay "X" dollars every week was definitely a deciding factor in my decision.*
By enrolling in online courses Renee was able to “double up” on classes which will allow her to complete her degree in a more timely fashion than had she not enrolled in online courses.

Sarah

Sarah is in her mid-twenties and took her first online course in 2009. By the end of fall semester 2011, she had completed five online courses. Sarah works part-time, is married, and has one child who is 8 years old. Sarah also volunteers in her community. Sarah’s program of study is categorized as a health program by her community college. She lives 30 minutes away from the community college.

Sarah completed most of her online courses during the first few semesters she was enrolled at the community college. Enrolling in online courses “enabled” Sarah to go back to school. Sarah explained,

*Being able to be an online student for much of my beginning classes enabled me to go back to school. I may not have been able to actually return to school if I wasn’t able to get part of it done online.*

Sarah indicated there were several factors that contributed to her decision to enroll in online courses when she said, “*The biggest reason I enrolled in online courses was because I needed to be able to stay working full-time and I also had a small child.*”

Prior to enrolling in online courses, Sarah did not view online courses or online students favorably. Sarah thought that students who enrolled in online courses did so “*because they wanted to cheat.*” Sarah also “*thought they [online courses] were for people who were too lazy to actually go to school.*” Related, Sarah thought online courses “*would be a breeze and an easy A.*” After becoming an online student, Sarah realized that her
preconceived notions of online classes were not accurate. Sarah commented, “*most of my online courses were appropriate for the course level.*” She also shared, “*I probably spent just as much time with my online courses as I would have if I would have taken them in a classroom.*” Sarah indicated she has had a good experience with her online courses.

Sarah isn’t “*entirely sure that gender has much of an influence*” on her experience with online courses. She does, however, think that her gender was a factor in her decision to enroll in online courses. She stated, “*I would more say that it [being a woman] had an influence on the decision to TAKE the classes because I had to continue to be wife and mom and still work in order for my family to function.*” When asked how her multiple roles as spouse, mother, and employee impacted her experience as an online student, Sarah responded that “*time for school occasionally went by the wayside*” due to her multiple roles. She continued,

*I know there were multiple times when I knew I had to finish the assignment, so I would just do the bare basics to get me the credit and not really put forth much effort or in-depth thought into the assignment or forum discussion. Occasionally I would have to quick type up a question response in a few minutes because I had to fix supper and then I only had a few minutes after that before I had to be at work.*

Sarah does not necessarily perceive her geographical location impacting her online student experience but sees her geographical location contributing to her decision to enroll in online courses. She explained,

*I'm not sure if the location impacted the class experience as much as the decision to take the online classes. I would have had to travel 30 minutes one way for class, and at that time, that just wasn't an option.*
Sarah acknowledged she found online courses to be “much more convenient” during the winter months when “travel can be difficult.”

Being an online student means a great deal to Sarah as she sees completing her community college degree as the first step in pursuing both her educational and career goals. Sarah plans to pursue a STEM degree at a four-year university and has aspirations to ultimately be a medical doctor. Enrolling in online courses was a way for Sarah to pursue an education while allowing her to fulfill her multiple roles.

**Tracy**

Tracy is in her mid-twenties and took her first online course in 2011. By the end of the fall semester 2011, she had completed five online courses. Tracy works full-time, is married, and has one child who is one year old. Tracy’s program of study is categorized as a health program by her community college. She lives 30 minutes away from the community college.

As a wife, a mother to a young child, and a full-time employee, Tracy enrolled in online courses because they allowed her to manage her multiple responsibilities. Tracy found that online courses “allow great flexibility with my schedule” and as a result she was able to balance her roles as wife, mother, employee, and student.

Prior to enrolling in online courses, Tracy thought they would be easier than face-to-face courses and would not require as much time and effort. After becoming an online student, Tracy realized her perceptions regarding online courses were inaccurate. She commented,

_I didn't expect such a level of commitment in online classes. I thought that they would be significantly easier than on-campus classes. I thought that I could just kinda screw_
around and not really focus as much as I should. I know now that there is a large amount of commitment needed to pass the courses. I actually spend about 4-5 days a week logging onto my online account and doing work. I also find that there is more reading and studying involved simply because there is no face-to-face time or class lecture. I like to maintain no lower than a B in my classes and in order to obtain that, I have to spend quite a bit of time reading and working on my schoolwork.

Tracy indicated she has had a “good experience” as an online student and has discovered that online courses have surpassed the expectations she had. Tracy reflected,

The classes have by-passed my expectations. They are more like a face-to-face class then I originally thought. I can’t slack off and screw around and maintain a decent grade in my online classes, which is good for me because it makes me work harder and focus more on my studies. I like that with my online classes I am forced to actually read the chapters and pay attention if I want to pass the class.

Tracy has not experienced any negative or derogatory comments from instructors or fellow students, which leads her to believe that being a woman has not affected her online student experience. Tracy indicated her multiple roles impact her online student experience in such a way that she has developed “a system of only working on school work when her [child] is napping or late at night after work when everyone is in bed.” Tracy’s geographical location has not impacted her online student experience as she lives 25 minutes away from campus. While Tracy does not have a great distance to travel, she prefers online courses as they allow her to manage her multiple roles as wife, mother, employee, and student more easily.
Being a student in general, as well as an online student, means a great deal to Tracy. Tracy commented, “Being an online student means that I can still get an education and actually become somebody that not only I can be proud of, but also somebody that my whole family can be proud of.” Enrolling in online courses allowed Tracy to pursue a degree and still be able to fulfill her various roles. Tracy further commented, “Being an online student makes my life easier and makes school less complicated”

**Debra**

Debra is in her mid-thirties and took her first online course in 2011. By the end of fall semester 2011, she had completed four online courses. Debra works full-time, is divorced, and has four children—ranging in age from 6 years old to fourteen years old. Debra’s program is categorized as a health program by her community college. She lives five minutes away from the community college.

Debra enrolled in her first online course because the course was required and it was only offered in an online format. Debra found she liked the flexibility online courses provided and enrolled in several more online courses. She shared, “I took more courses online because I liked being able to set my own pace within my busy schedule. I could work, raise a family, and earn a degree at the same time.”

Prior to enrolling in online courses, Debra thought online courses would be easier, would be “self-paced” in that she could complete assignments anytime during the course delivery period, and would not require as much time preparing for tests as they would be open book. After becoming an online student, Debra realized she “was totally wrong” about her perceptions regarding online courses and being an online student. She pointed out,
After completing several online courses I have learned that I was totally wrong about my expectations. Some of the instructors have had rigid time schedules for completion of assignments, the course material takes a little while to absorb because you don’t see and hear it like you would in a normal class lecture- you only read and internalize the information, and even if all of the tests are basically open note/open book- they are harder because the instructors often ask questions that are not so obvious to ensure that you are reading the assigned material.

Debra indicated she has had a “great experience” as an online student and is happy with her experience. She commented that she had “learned a lot from the courses” she has taken.

Debra sees being a woman as influencing the responses she makes in threaded discussions. She commented,

*I think the responses I give in thread discussions have a very feminine perspective. I see the world through the eyes of a woman and mother. I have noticed that most of the people in my courses are women also, so we tend to have a lot in common. Not that men don't contribute a lot to the class, but you can tell they have a different outlook.*

Upon further questioning, Debra expanded saying,

*Women's responses tend to have a balance of social awareness that men do not have sometimes. They show deeper caring about other people's feelings. Women answer in almost an apologetic way to answers if they do not agree with a post a classmate has made. Women also clearly are showing distress about being a mom and student at the same time, but deny trouble juggling different roles. I have taken psychology and sociology classes that point out differences in male and female roles in family and*
society and most of these stay true to form. Men tend to answer questions from a "me" point of view with little apology if they do not agree with another student. When speaking of parenting they tend to have a sterner parenting approach. I hate to stereotype, but have noticed that women tend to be more nurturing and supportive to other students. If someone posts answers to questions about a death or hardship in their life the women will post a supportive response directly to the pain or loss the classmate is feeling and the male students respond only to what the teacher requires. As a mother most women put their children first and themselves last. This is not always the correct response, but we understand what it's like to get little sleep or thanks when caring for a family. As women I think we see social inequality every day. We see that we work hard in many different roles and are rewarded less than men. All interaction online and in person is a reflection of our life experiences. My responses have a nurturing, supportive, religious, knowledge based, tough-love perspective.

As a mother to four children, a full-time employee, and someone who is “serious about school,” Debra acknowledged how challenging it is to manage her roles as mother, employee, and student. She shared,

*It's tough some days! My schedule changes from day to day and I usually balance deadlines at school, work, and home constantly. If I have assignments due we have a not so fabulous dinner at home that night, but I make up for it on another night. When juggling you never fully give your attention to any one area because you have to be mindful of all of the others at the same time. Most of my energy goes into my [children] and studying right now.*
Debra lives one mile away from her community college, so she does not see geographical location impacting her experience as an online student. Debra, however, does think that by living in a rural area that her comments and responses in threaded course discussions “reflect a lot of small town values.”

As a result of being an online student, Debra’s written communication skills have improved and she has gained a better understanding of the Internet’s capacity. Prior to being an online student, Debra did not use the computer very much but through online course assignments she was introduced to various Internet sites. She explained,

*Being an online student gives me a different medium to learn in. I do not use the computer for much more than school or email so some of the assignments push me out of my comfort zone to learn a little more about data base searches on the internet. It also expands my knowledge base through books, videos, and student interaction. I feel I communicate best verbally and being an online student increases my ability to get my point across through the written (or typed) word.*

Debra also indicated that she has derived a sense of personal accomplishment and achievement from enrolling in online courses. She reflected,

*Being an online student means that I can take pride in personal achievement. I know that I worked hard and gained knowledge with limited input from others. By limited I mean that I don’t always have that back and forth interaction that I would get in an in person class. I have to decipher information in my own head.*

**Meredith**

Meredith is in her early thirties and took her first online course in 2011. By the end of fall semester 2011, she had completed three online courses. Meredith works part-time, is
married, and has one child and two stepchildren. Meredith is enrolled in an Associate of Arts program. She lives 20 minutes away from the community college.

Meredith’s first exposure to online courses occurred in summer 2011 when she enrolled in three eight-week online courses. Meredith wanted to continue as a full-time student during the summer as she did not want to lose her momentum and motivation for studying and being a student. In order to continue as a full-time student and remain eligible for financial aid, Meredith had to enroll in online courses as her community college does not offer many face-to-face courses in the summer.

Prior to enrolling in online courses, Meredith thought online courses would be easy and not require much effort. Meredith also thought online instructors would not be as “dedicated” as face-to-face instructors. Meredith commented, “I thought I would breeze through the classes and get all A’s with not much effort.” Meredith had this perception of online courses as a result of conversations she had had with fellow students. She shared,

I was making assumptions about the easiness of online classes based on what other people had told me. I was told you really didn’t need to put as much effort into them as a face-to-face course since there was no instructor present. I also thought they would be easier because I wouldn’t have to be present on a set time schedule, thus freeing my time for homework and other daily activities. I thought the online instructors might not be as dedicated because there is a lack of personality present; the students might just be a number to them. I think the reason I thought this again goes back to what I had heard from other people. When a person tells you that they never had to open a book or barely participate in their online classes— it can send a
message that the instructors aren't as dedicated. That is how I felt before taking the classes.

After becoming an online student, Meredith discovered her perceptions about online courses and online instructors were inaccurate. She reflected,

The classes I took were more involved (threaded discussions, peer review) than I imagined they would be. The instructors were also more dedicated than I thought they would be---they actually paid attention to the work I was submitting and graded accordingly.

Meredith did not enjoy her online student experience. She indicated she was “very stressed” and “overwhelmed” by her online student experience. Meredith stated,

I haven't had a great experience as an online student, mostly because I took on too many courses in a short amount of time. At times I felt lost; misunderstanding an assignment for example. I was at times frustrated by not being able to get quick responses to questions I had for the instructor. I was also overwhelmed at times because in at least one of my classes there was so much "busy" work (peer reviews, journals, threaded discussions with research, ungraded quizzes) that I felt like I was neglecting my homework. If I were to sum up my experience with online classes thus far, I would use the word overwhelming.

Meredith had not initially considered how being a woman may have impacted/influenced her experience as an online student, but after the question was posed she acknowledged that being a woman “may have played a part in being overwhelmed” with her online courses. Meredith found it difficult to concentrate on her online courses, as they did not necessitate her to leave her home and consequently her responsibilities as a wife and
mother. As a result, Meredith found herself focusing on her “children, housework, and appointments.”

Even though Meredith did not have a positive online student experience, she acknowledged there were positive aspects of being an online student. She reflected,

*Being an online student gave me more time to be at home with my family. It also freed up some of my time so I was able to take my [children] to appointments and/or school activities that I may have otherwise missed (if I were in a classroom). Being an online student helped relieve my husband of the task of staying at home with sick children and going to appointments. It saved my family on the financial costs of me driving to and from [community college], and the costs of daycare.*

Enrolling in online courses allowed Meredith to pursue a degree and still be able to fulfill her various roles. Meredith has aspirations of pursuing a bachelor’s degree and achieving her Associate of Arts degree is the first step in fulfilling her educational goals.

**Cindy**

Cindy is in her early forties and took her first online course in 2008. By the end of fall semester 2011, she had completed eight online courses. Cindy is married and volunteers in her community. Cindy’s program is categorized as a health program by her community college. She lives 90 minutes away from the community college.

Cindy’s decision to enroll in online courses was due to a combination of factors including living a distance from the community college and having only one car in her household. Enrolling in online courses allowed Cindy to “*take family members to appointments*” and be available for any family emergencies that may arise.
Prior to enrolling in online courses, Cindy anticipated that online courses would be “more difficult because there’s not a teacher right there to ask questions.” Cindy added, “it takes a lot of discipline to study for online courses because you don’t have the interaction with a teacher like in a face-to-face class.” After becoming an online student, Cindy found that her impressions regarding online courses were correct in that online course require a great deal of time. Cindy indicated her online courses “have been wonderful” and she has found being an online student to be a rewarding experience.

Cindy does not see being a woman impacting or influencing her experience as an online student because she lives in a multi-generational household and does not need to worry about household chores as she would if she and her husband lived in a single family household. She elaborated,

_In my situation, being a woman doesn't really impact or influence my experience as an online student. I live in a multi-generational house so I don't have to worry about getting cooking or cleaning done like if we were living by ourselves. I do that stuff when I know I have the time to do it._

Cindy indicated she tries to manage her multiple roles in such a way that they do not impact each other. For example, Cindy stated, “I try to do most of my schoolwork while my husband is at work so that it doesn't interfere with the time he and I have.” While Cindy tries to manage her roles and responsibilities so they do not interfere with each other, she is not always successful. Cindy is very close to her nephew and at times has had to prioritize her student role over her aunt role. She shared,
I do sometimes feel like I have to put being an aunt on the back burner because sometimes I do still have work to do when my nephew is here. It’s hard to tell him no when he asks me to play and I have schoolwork to do.

Enrolling in online courses assisted Cindy in her pursuit of an education and ultimately completing a degree. Degree completion is important to Cindy as she sees her degree leading to meaningful employment and added financial stability for her family.

Erin

Erin is in her mid-thirties and took her first online course in 2010. By the end of fall semester 2011, she had completed seven online courses. Erin works full-time, is married, and has three children ranging in ages from two to six years old. Erin’s program is categorized as a health program by her community college. She lives 25 minutes away from the community college.

Erin is employed in a field that has seen position elimination and position reconfiguration. As a result of this industry action, Erin sought out an educational program that would provide a “back-up plan” in the event Erin’s position is eliminated or reconfigured. As Erin investigated educational programs, it was necessary that the education program allow Erin to continue working full-time and fulfill her roles as a wife and mother. These factors prompted Erin to enroll in online courses. Erin shared,

I needed to take courses that would work with my current work schedule and also my family. I work full time as a [job title] from 8-4 and then I also have a husband and 3 kids, so I have many obligations during the waking hours :) I needed to be able to access the material at a time when I had no other commitments and could
concentrate, which is usually later at night when everyone is in bed or on the weekends, when my husband can watch the kids while i do homework.

Prior to enrolling in online courses, Erin had some familiarity with online courses and what they entail as she has had interaction and contact with online students through her job. As a result of these interactions, Erin had been exposed to the structure of online courses as well as some of the online instructor expectations. Erin indicated she has had a “good” online student experience and commented,

*The experience has been positive in that i have been able to do the homework required in the amount of time given and do it fairly well. I think it is good for my schedule and I feel that the content has been close to the content i have learned in the face to face classroom in previous college classes.*

While Erin has had a positive experience as an online student, she did point out, what she considers to be, a missing component from online education. Online education does not easily foster mentoring and networking opportunities, as do face-to-face courses, which has the potential to limit an online students opportunity for internships, practicums, and employment. Erin pointed out,

*It is valuable to have an advisor/teacher that you can ask specific questions about the profession and that can guide you in how to get a job, what things you really need to know etc. I have an advisor from [community college], but i don't actually get to meet with the [academic] department and those relationships help in getting jobs and knowing more about the profession. My online professors are helpful in answering questions, but it's not the same as the face to face guidance you get from your professors on campus about the [name] profession etc.*
She reiterated her thoughts on what is missing from online education when she said,

Like i said, i do think there are components missing as far as that mentoring piece you get from your actual instructors face to face, where they help you find experiences that fit your likes and personalities. I definitely know that component is missing, because in my previous education experiences, i have really counted on those relationships and my professors have actually known me really well and could speak to my strengths or weaknesses etc. I worry about that. But otherwise, online has been good!

Erin did not initially perceive that being a woman impacted her online student experience. Upon further reflection, however, Erin commented that being a woman does impact her online student experience. She said,

I guess i think that being a woman does impact my learning because i feel a great amount of responsibility to do well, but also to cater to my families needs first. Harder for me to shut off mom mode than i think it would be for my husband. I have feelings of guilt for taking time away to do this learning...but yet, i do believe the online classes have afforded me a much better option than actually traveling for classes.

Erin acknowledged that her multiple roles impact her online student experience by making it difficult to focus on her course work as she is pulled in multiple directions. Erin stated, “Multiple roles makes it a little harder to actually grasp the content of the classes because my mind is many other places too.” Erin also acknowledged that she prioritizes her multiple roles as needed. She shared,
I have definitely put being a student on the back burner, because my job and mom roles come first. I think my family suffers some on the weekends because the time I would normally spend with them, some of that time is spent cramming in my homework. My husband is very helpful and supportive tho, so when he’s not working a ton...he takes over my responsibilities.

Erin does not perceive her geographical location as having an impact on her online student experience.

Enrolling in online courses has meaning for Erin. Online courses allowed Erin to have a “back-up plan” in the event her current position is eliminated or reconfigured. Erin commented she feels “empowered” by being an online student. She said, “It is empowering because i feel like i am giving myself options” and “options for my family.”
CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

Findings, based on analysis of interview responses, are presented in this chapter. Online interviews were conducted to better understand how women attending rural community colleges (as defined by NCES) experience being online students. To that end, interview questions focused on 1) understanding/exploring motivation for enrolling in online courses, 2) expectations about online student experience prior to experience and understanding reality of the experience, 3) the impact of identity on being an online student, and 4) the meaning given to the experience by participants. Each of these sub-questions served as a theme to organize the data. Participant quotes are used to illustrate these themes. Quotes are presented, for the most part, as participants sent them to me, including text abbreviations and emoticons. Minor spelling corrections were made so not to distract the reader. Findings are presented in the order in which interview questions were asked.

Motivation to Enroll in Online Courses

This section explores the factors that motivated participants to enroll in asynchronous online courses. Two findings were discovered as to why participants enrolled in online courses. One finding focused on participants’ life circumstances, and the second finding centered on other reasons for enrolling in online courses.

Life Circumstances

Most participants commented it was because of their life circumstances that they enrolled in online courses. Life circumstances, such as working, being married, and having children, were primary factors for enrolling in online courses. Participants saw enrolling in
online courses as a way to be a student and to fulfill their family and work responsibilities.

As Kimberly explained,

*I work at [business] in the evenings until about mid-night and I have a [child] who is in elementary school. Since I try to focus on [child] and my husband while they are home, I knew I wanted to do my school work at night when they are sleeping. Since I can’t go to class at 3 in the morning, I figured asynchronous online courses would be the best way to get my diploma 😊*

Sarah explained the factors that contributed to her decision to enroll in online courses by stating,

*The biggest reason that I enrolled in the online courses was because I needed to be able to stay working full-time and I also had a small child. By completing my classes online I could do them whenever I had free time such as when my [child] was napping or even if I had time during work hours.*

Tracy, echoed this when she said,

*I have a full-time job and also am raising a 1 year old. I took the online class because it allowed greater flexibility with my schedule. I tend to do most of my homework and tests late at night while my [child] is asleep and taking classes online allows me to get everything done on time, yet at strange hours.*

Because participants were busy working and raising children online courses provided needed flexibility for the participants to fulfill other obligations than being a student.

**Other Factors**

While life circumstances were the primary factors why participants enrolled in online courses, they were not the only reasons. For Debra, one of her required courses was only
offered on an online format. As the course was required for her program of study, Debra had to enroll in an online course. After experiencing an online course, Debra enrolled in additional online courses because doing so allowed her to “work, raise a family, and earn a degree at the same time.”

Enrolling in online courses was a means for Meredith to continue her program of study over the summer. Meredith’s community college does not offer very many face-to-face courses over the summer, so in order to continue her studies, enrolling in online courses was what she needed to do. It was important for Meredith to continue her studies over the summer, as she did not want to “lose motivation for learning and homework.”

**Expectations and Realities About Online Experience**

This section explores both participants’ expectations of the online experience prior to becoming online students and the reality of their experiences. Findings reveal that participant expectations were not congruent with the actual reality of being an online student.

**Expectations Prior to Experience**

Prior to experiencing online courses and becoming an online student, participants had numerous expectations regarding online courses and what being an online student would be like. Several expectations were commonly held among the participants. One commonly shared expectation was that online courses would be easy. Tracy said, “I thought that they [online courses] would be significantly easier than on-campus classes. I thought that I could just kinda screw around and not really focus as much as I should.” Meredith echoed the same sentiment when she said, “I thought that all online classes were fairly easy. I thought I would breeze through the classes and get all A’s without much effort.” Sarah also thought
online courses would be easy. She said, “I thought they would be a breeze. I thought they would be an easy A, they wouldn’t take up much of my time.”

As evident by their statements above, participants expected online courses not to be time intensive and/or not to require a great deal of effort. This expectation around how much time online courses would require was a second commonly shared expectation among participants. Participants thought online courses would not require a significant amount of time on their part. Sarah exemplified this expectation when she said, “I really thought that I could spend maybe an hour a week doing class work and that would be it.” Similarly, Tracy said, “I figured I would spend a lot less time actually working on schoolwork and thought that I would only have to ‘check-in’ once or twice a week.”

A third commonly shared expectation was that online courses were self-paced and assignments could be completed according to student timelines. Renee said, “I thought the time frame would be strictly my own and that I would have the whole semester to complete tests, quizzes, assignments whenever I wanted.” Debra said, “I thought the material would be easier than an in person class, I could set my own schedule and pace, commit less time to studying because [e]verything would be open book.”

While most participants expected online course to be easy(ier), there were a few participants who thought being an online student would be difficult. Erika and Kimberly had each been advised that online courses were difficult and time consuming. Erika said,

When I started looking into online courses, various advisors told me the online courses were more difficult and more time consuming than face-to-face classes. With that, I was also told the average student spends about 10 hours per week per online course. Given that information I expected to work my backside off so I could succeed.
Kimberly also had been advised about the time commitment involved with online courses. Kimberly had been told that it was not recommended to enroll in her program of study and to hold a full-time job due to the program’s intensity. While Kimberly had been advised about the time intensive nature of online courses, she also recognized the structure of online courses, specifically not having an in-person instructor, could make online courses more difficult. Kimberly said,

_I expected to work harder than I would have in a classroom setting. I knew that if I didn’t understand something, I would have to essentially “teach” myself. Of course I can e-mail my instructors but I prefer to find the answer myself before asking for help so I can learn the things I have trouble with. I know that this program would be intense (I was told that you can’t take this course and have a full-time job because the classes take too much time) but I didn’t really expect it to be this time consuming._

**Reality of Online Experience**

The reality of the online experience was not what participants had anticipated. Most participants thought online courses would be easy, not require a significant amount of time, and would be self-paced. The reality of the experience was that online courses were as difficult as face-to-face courses, were time intensive, and maintain a due date schedule similar to face-to-face courses. Debra said,

_After completing several online courses I have learned that I was totally wrong about my expectations. Some of the instructors have had rigid time schedules for completion of assignments, the course material takes a little while to absorb because you don’t see and hear it like you would in a normal lecture—you only read and internalize the information, and even if all tests are basically open note/open book—they are harder_
because the instructors often ask questions that are not so obvious to ensure you are reading assigned material.

Tracy said,

*They [online courses] are more like face-to-face class then I originally thought. I can’t slack off and screw around and maintain a decent grade in my online classes, which is good because it makes me work harder and focus more on my studies. I like that with online class I am forced to actually read the chapters and pay attention if I want to pass the class.*

Even participants who anticipated online courses to be difficult and time consuming discovered their expectations were not entirely accurate. While Kimberly expected online courses to be demanding she was not prepared for how demanding and time intensive they were.

**Description of online experience.** Most participants describe their online experience positively. Amy said, “*My experience as an online student is definitely positive. I’m learning a lot and know its all stuff I can apply to future employment.*” Similarly, Debra remarked, “*Overall it has been a great experience. I have learned a lot from the course I have taken.*” Erin described the experience as fitting into her schedule and favorably compared online and face-to-face courses:

*The experience has been positive in that i have been able to do the homework required in the amount of time given and do it fairly well. I think it is good for my schedule and I feel that the content has been close to the content i have learned in the face to face classroom in previous college classes.*
While most participants indicated having a positive experience as online students there were a few participants who described their experience less favorably. One participant, Meredith, did not have “a great experience as an online student.” Meredith’s first exposure to online courses occurred during summer when she enrolled in three eight-week online courses. In addition to the three online courses, Meredith was also enrolled in a summer face-to-face course. Having not had any exposure to online courses and to enroll in three online courses simultaneously that were condensed summer courses as well proved to be “overwhelming” to Meredith. She explained,

*I haven’t had a great experience as an online student, mostly because I took on too many courses in a short amount of time. At times I felt lost; misunderstanding an assignment for example. I was also overwhelmed at times because in at least one of my classes there was so much “busy” work (peer reviews, journals, threaded discussions with research, ungraded quizzes) that I felt like I was neglecting my homework. If I were to sum up my experience with online classes thus far, I would use the word overwhelming.*

While not having the same experience as Meredith, Renee had what she called a “so-so experience” as an online student. This is because Renee has both favorable and unfavorable things to say about online courses. Online courses allowed Renee to complete required courses for her program of study and provided the needed flexibility for her to fulfill her multiple roles, but she questioned how much she learned in her online courses. Renee explained,

*My experience has been so-so. I say that because although I was able to fulfill my class requirements and credit hours needed for my current program, I don’t feel that I*
learned as well if I had taken the classes face-to-face. This had nothing to do with the instructors. My experience seemed to be solely based on the amount of effort that I decided to put forth on my studies. I loved being able to take the classes online because of the ease of access, and also because that meant less time I had to physically be on the college campus or time I would have spent driving. I feel like I was able to manage my time more effectively because I could take my tests when I wanted--within a time frame, of course. The online courses fit better with my schedule at the time, but I don't feel I learned as much as I could have.

Renee started to question her learning in online courses as a result of an experience she had in a face-to-face course in which material from a previous online course was reviewed. During the review Renee realized she “couldn’t go in depth on most things.” She explained,

*Currently we are going through a [specific] chapter in one of our texts. One of our pre-reqs for our [name of program] classes was [specific class]--a class most of us took online. We had no proctored tests or quizzes. I don't feel that I got as much out of that class as I would have had I taken it face-to-face. I remember a lot of the basic material, but I couldn't go in depth on most things. I found that I didn't retain the material as well as I should have. I also felt that it wasn't as challenging as it could have been if it were face-to-face.*

**Impact of instructors on online experience.** When describing their online experience several participants shared frustrating experiences they have had with instructors. Instructors who did not respond in a timely manner to questions or concerns, who did not grade promptly, and who were not sensitive to life circumstances were frustrating to
participants. Erika, who has taken 16 online courses, described her frustration with an instructor:

*I have one instructor who is disorganized, untimely, non-responsive to student questions and concerns. The idea behind these classes is being able to schedule coursework around the life you have to lead. That is difficult to do when an instructor doesn't post assignments in a timely fashion, doesn't open tests on stated dates (the tests for this class are timed, and they are 5 hours long. That is a time frame that doesn't magically appear in my life and if they are not opened on time I have to stay up all night to do them), and sometimes doesn't post the material at all. The online lectures are unorganized and not always accessible; the slide shows are not put together properly so graphics are covering some of the notes. This class is a mess!!*

Erika recalled another experience:
_Last semester I had an instructor go on vacation for 3 weeks and was essentially unavailable for questions. Online courses do not even allow for holidays “off”, yet an instructor vanished for 3 weeks and there were 2 assignments due in that time. Those types of things disappoint me severely, and i had expected more responsibility from an instructor._

Tracy also had frustrating experiences with instructors. She described her experience:

_These instructors were very strict and not flexible when it came to allowing extensions for medical reasons. One instructor refused to give me an extra day to take a test when my nephew was in the hospital with RSV for 4 days. Another time, the phone company in town was messing with the lines that hooked up internet throughout town. My instructor told me that this was not a sufficient reason to allow_
an extension on an assignment. The same one was not very quick at responding to questions about assignments. I waited for a reply to a question for 3 days. [Instructor] finally answered me the day after the assignment was due, which basically was no help at all.

Amy shared that she was frustrated with an instructor who did not have assignments graded before tests were given. She said,

My only not so positive experience is a class where our homework is not graded by the time we take tests. It's really hard to know what I need to focus on more when I don't know what it even is.

Several participants commented that they have either considered dropping or did drop an online course because of their experience with the instructor. Amy considered dropping an online course. She shared,

In one computer course [the instructor] had us turning in more than 5 assignments a week on simple things that were just really time consuming. It was nights of staying up until 2 am to get one assignment done and then dragging myself through the work day to do it again. Then [the instructor] took a month to grade them. Finally [the instructor] gave up on having us do it because it was taking [the instructor] too long to grade them all.

Tracy considered dropping a course but found a “system” that worked for her and did not drop the course. Tracy said,

I have considered dropping a class. I am currently in [name of course] this semester and my instructor wants us to research and write a discussion piece 3 days a week. Now, I work full-time and go to school full-time, and I don't really have much time to
I have managed to find a system that works for me to keep my grade up, so I didn't drop it.

Cindy did drop an online course because the instructor did not answer her questions in a timely fashion. She explained, “I have dropped [name of class] class. If you had questions for the instructor it would take [instructor] past the due date of the assignment to answer your question. Then [instructor] dock points because your assignment was late.”

Not all participants have considered dropping a course. A few participants commented that they did not want to fall behind in completing their programs and had they dropped a course they would have delayed program completion. Sarah said,

*I don't remember if I considered dropping a class, most likely not. The reason is that the program of study I was in didn't really allow for dropping a class unless you wanted to start an entire year later. The [name of program] program that I was in required all the pre-reqs done before starting the "in class" portion of the [name of program] program and if you didn't have them finished then you had to wait until the program began again the next year.*

Participants had varied experiences and feelings about online courses and being an online student.

**Impact of Identity(ies) on Experience**

As the purpose of this study was to better understand how adult women attending rural community colleges experience being online students, interview questions focused on identity were posed to participants. Questions focused on understanding how being a woman impacted the online experience as well as how various multiple roles and geographical location impacted the online experience. This section explores how participants perceived
various identities impacting/influencing their online student experience. Findings reveal that participants identify more closely with their multiple roles than with the broad identity of woman. Geographical location did not appear to have much impact.

**Impact of Being a Woman on Online Student Experience**

Participants fell into one of four categories when describing how being a woman impacted or influenced their online student experience. One group of participants had not really considered how being a woman could and would impact or influence their experience. Erika and Meredith both stated the same response, “I hadn’t considered how being a woman impacted my experience.” However, both participants went on to consider how being a woman impacted their experience. Meredith was able to see that perhaps being a woman and roles associated with being a woman may have contributed to her being overwhelmed when taking online courses. Meredith shared,

_I think being a woman and an online student may have played a part in my being overwhelmed with the online classes I have taken. I was not able to be away at a college during my courses. I don’t think I put as great of a concentration on my studies as I do when I am in a classroom because I was focused on other things--like my toddler, 2 step-[children], house work, and appointments._

As Erika considered how being a woman impacted her experience she appeared to understand the question in terms of experiencing discrimination due to gender. This interpretation is based on Erika’s comment of, “I haven’t seen any sexism in my classes.”

A second group of participants indicated being a woman had no impact on their online student experiences. Cindy does not perceive being a woman has impacting her
online experience because she lives in a multi-generational home and does not need to worry about attending to household chores. She said,

In my situation, being a woman doesn’t really impact or influence my experience as an online student. I live in a multi-generational house so I don’t have to worry about getting cooking or cleaning done like if we were living by ourselves. I do that stuff when I know I have time to do it.

Kimberly succinctly stated that being a woman “had no bearing” on her online student experience.

A third group of participants provided contradictory statements when answering the interview question. That is, some participants commented that being a woman had no impact on their online student experience, but then made comments indicating how being a woman did impact their experience. Erin, for example, initially said being a woman has no impact on being an online student as she thinks both women and men experience online courses the same way. Upon further reflection, Erin went on to say that being a woman does impact her experience. She said,

I guess i think that being a woman does impact my learning because i feel a great amount of responsibility to do well, but also to cater to my family’s needs first. Harder for me to shut off mom mode than i think it would be for my husband. I have feelings of guilt for taking time away to do this learning...but yet, i do believe the online classes have afforded me a much better option than actually traveling for classes.
Likewise, Amy initially said that being a woman had no impact on her experience but went on to say how she feels internal pressure to be “perfect” in her student responsibilities and family responsibilities. She said,

_I don't think being a woman has much impact. I think I put more pressure on myself than others do though. I expect better grades while still running a household and I know that I can't have both things "perfect" at the same time._

A fourth group of participants commented that being a woman does impact and influence their online experience. Two of the participants in this group equated being a woman with gendered roles typically associated with women when answering the interview question. These participants indicated being a woman contributed to why they enrolled in online courses. Sarah stated, “I would more say that it [being a woman] had an influence on the decision to TAKE the classes because I had to continue to be wife and mom and still work in order for my family to function.” Debra sees being woman as influencing the discussion posts she makes in her online courses. Debra pointed out, “I think the responses I give in threaded discussions have a very feminine perspective. I see the world through the eyes of a woman and mother.”

**Impact of Multiple Roles on Online Student Experience**

Participants easily recognized and acknowledged the multiple roles they hold and how those multiple roles impact their online experience. Erika described the impact of her multiple roles, specifically her role of being a mother and a partner, and how they impacted her online student experience. She said,

_Every role I play impacts my schooling. My partner has been in [different state] for 9 months for work and is insanely busy so i drop everything when we get a chance to_
talk. I have stopped in the middle of time tests for a 15 minute conversation with him. My role as a mother has ensured that I don’t get adequate sleep to sustain my memory so any complicated lessons I have to reread and take multiple notes on but it also it the force that sustains my will to continue in school. My [child] has begged me to drop out of school because [child] wants more play time with me, and I again explain to [child] how important school is, and then I take a “game break”. I’ve learned to schedule one night a week of time just for the kids and myself to have fun together.

Debra described the impact of her multiple roles on her experience as an online student,

I am divorced, but date sometimes. If I have a boyfriend they know when I have work to do and don’t come over at those times. I am serious about school and they know that upfront. As a mother, my [children] know the same. I try to do work or tests when they are gone or in bed. Sometimes this is not always possible and they try to play quietly while a get my work done. My family is supportive and offers encouragement when they can. They understand if I can’t talk when they call because most of our tests online are timed. My job is extremely supportive and usually will let me leave early if all of my work is done if they know I have homework to do.

Amy simply said, “they [multiple roles] have a huge impact.” She added,

There are nights I feel like I’m putting my family on the back burner or slacking on my schoolwork. There isn’t much impact with my job, I’m still able to get my work done but I do have to straighten my mind out and remind myself not to worry about school while working and not to worry about work while I’m trying to read or study for school.

Erin also commented that because of her multiple roles, she has multiple things on her mind
and has found it difficult to grasp course content. She said, “*multiple roles make it a little harder to actually grasp the content of the classes because my mind in many other places to.*”

**Reciprocal relationship.** Participants also recognized that not only do their multiple roles impact their online student experience, but their online student experience impacts their multiple roles as well. The roles most cited as being impacted by the online student experience were roles associated with family (i.e., wife/partner, mother, sister, aunt). Employee roles were also mentioned as being impacted. Some of these roles were impacted both positively and negatively. Participants who felt their online student experience impacted their roles positively spoke of online courses allowing their multiple roles to be maintained. Meredith found being an online student had a positive impact on her multiple roles. She explained,

> *Being an online student gave me more time to be home with my family. It also freed up some of my time so I was able to take my [children] to appointments and/or school functions that I may have missed*

Sarah similarly found that being an online student allowed her to maintain her multiple roles. She said, “*Because I could take online classes, my family and work lives were allowed to stay almost the same.*” She went on to say that there “*was less of a time commitment away from both of these areas in my life*” which she believes allowed her “*lives to stay almost the same.*” Tracy found that online classes allowed her to “*be home with [child] more during the day.*” She added, “*on the nights I don’t work, I am able to stay at home and spend quality family time with my husband and [child].*”

In some instances, it was because of their multiple roles that participants sought
online courses, as they had to fulfill those roles. This was the case for Renee and Sarah.

Renee reflected,

*It was because of those roles that online classes fit the best for me. As a mother, I still had the time to spend with my children; I could pick my [child] up from school, attend [child’s] school functions. I felt that my role as a student didn't interfere with that of my children. As a spouse, I felt the same way. My husband was more than willing to accommodate my schedule. But taking online classes definitely allowed me to spend more time with him as well. I was still able to work full-time, which I loved.*

Sarah also enrolled in online courses as a means to maintain her multiple roles. She simply said, “I had to continue to be wife and mom and still work in order for my family to function.”

Participants who felt being an online student impacted their roles negatively at times spoke of having less time to fulfill and/or attend to their roles. Erika saw this decrease in available time impacting her children the most. She explained,

*First and foremost my children have been affected the most. Mommy doesn’t have 4 hours a night to crawl around on the floor, play games, or snuggle. Before I started school we discussed as a family the affects it would have on them, and that helped for the first year. Now it is getting harder and we have refresher discussions frequently. I have designated one night a week that I do not do any studying or homework and at least two weekend days a month.*

Meredith also spoke how she feels guilty when she is not able to spend time with her child because she has homework. She said, “I have a [young child], and [child] does not understand that I have to do homework. [Child] wants to play, cuddle, and just spend time
with me and that makes me feel guilty.” Kimberly commented that her child does not like “Mom’s school” because since becoming an online student she is not able to spend as much time with her child as she had been able to prior to becoming an online student.

**Managing multiple roles.** As evident by the comments above, participants feel a pull between all of their multiple roles. It is a constant struggle to manage their roles. Participants do their best to manage their roles and corresponding responsibilities but acknowledge it is challenging. Debra described the difficulty of trying to manage her multiple roles including her student role. She said,

*It's tough some days! My schedule changes from day to day and I usually balance deadlines at school, work, and home constantly. If I have assignments due we have a not so fabulous dinner at home that night, but I make up for it on another night. When juggling you never fully give your attention to any one area because you have to be mindful of all of the others at the same time. Most of my energy goes into my [children] and studying right now.*

Participants commented it is not unusual for them to put various roles on the “back burner” as a way to manage their multiple roles. There was not one consistent role that was placed on the “back burner.” Participants seemed to alternate between which role would be prioritized. Role priority appeared to be determined by which role was the most pressing at that moment and therefore required participant’s attention. Sarah shared that her student role at times “went by the wayside” due to the pressing demands of her other roles. She explained,

*Because of all the roles to fill, time for school occasionally went by the wayside. I know that there were multiple times where I knew I had to finish the assignment, so I*
would just do the bare basics to get me the credit, and not really put forth much effort or in depth thought into the assignment or forum discussion. Occasionally I would have to quick type up a question response in a few minutes because I had to fix supper and then I only had a few minutes after that before I had to be at work. Although my employer would let me do homework while I was working, there was no internet available, so my assignments had to be sent in from home. Many times I typed out a quick response for an assignment due at midnight, at 9:45pm and then left to be at work by 10pm.

Sarah also described not always attending to household chores as a result of her student role. She said, “I felt quite often that I put my family on the back burner...well maybe not my family but things like cooking and cleaning and such went by the wayside.” Sarah also thought her family felt neglected when performing her student role. She said,

I think there were occasions that my family felt put on the back burner, but I made sure that it didn’t happen very often. My [child] was the one who gave me the hardest time about not being able to do things with [child] all the time.

Erin also shared she has put her student role on the “back burner”. She explained,

I have definitely put being a student on the back burner, because my job and mom roles come first. I think my family suffers some on the wkends because the time i would normally spend with them, some of that time is spent cramming in my homework. My husband is very helpful and supportive tho, so when he's not working a ton...he takes over my responsibilities.

In Kimberly’s case she perceives that her student role has taken priority over her other roles. Because Kimberly is enrolled in a program of study delivered entirely online all of her time
and energy is devoted to her student role. As a result, she is not able to fulfill her other roles in the manner she would like to. She explained,

*I actually think that it's the other way around. I think that being an online student has had an impact on my being a wife, mother, and employee. Because of the intensity of the program, school has had to come first and everyone else has sort of had to deal with it. I feel like I have put my husband and son "on the back burner" so to speak. I always try to spend some time with them but it's not as much as it used to be.*

*Thankfully they understand that it's temporary.*

**Impact of Geographical Location on Online Student Experience**

Participants fell into one of two categories when describing how their geographical location impacted/influenced their online student experience. The two categories included: 1) geographical location had no impact on their online student experience and 2) geographical location did impact the online student experience.

**No geographical impact.** A few participants commented that their geographical location had no impact on their online student experience. Participants in this group live within 20 miles of the community college they attend and do not perceive their location as impacting their experience. Kimberly commented she thought her experience would be the same regardless of her location. She said, *“I'm not sure it makes a difference. I think my experience would be the same if I was doing this anywhere else.”* Erin did not see geographical location as having an impact on being an online student as she has a reliable Internet connection. She said, *“Location isn't a big impact. We are able to access the internet and that is the main thing.”* Debra also did not see her geographical location impacting her online student experience as she lives close to campus and could access
campus computers to do her class work/homework if needed. She said, “I only live about 1 mile from the actual college, so distance is not an issue. If I have problems with my computer at home I can easily drive to the college and use theirs.”

**Geographical impact.** Other participants commented that their geographical location did impact their online student experience. A few commented that geographical location contributed to their decision to enroll in online courses. Sarah explained,

*I'm not sure if the location impacted the class experience as much as the decision to take the online classes. I would have had to travel 30 minutes one way for class, and at that time, that just wasn’t an option. Plus in the winter it snows and travel can be difficult, so online classes were much more convenient.*

Similar to Sarah, Amy had concerns about driving in winter weather. Amy particularly was concerned about driving in bad weather as she lives three hours away from the community college she attends. Compounding Amy’s concerns regarding winter weather is that her husband works for a utility company so when inclement winter weather occurs her husband is often gone. His unpredictable work schedule would make attending a face-to-face class difficult because Amy would need to find someone to watch her children. By enrolling in online courses, Amy does not need to worry about driving in bad weather nor does she have to worry about the possibility of missing class. As Amy explained,

*I live in Iowa so it has a big impact. I really don’t want to be driving to or from class in a snow storm or freezing rain. My husband is an [utility company employee] so during bad weather he's not home and I would have to find someone to take the kids for school. This way I don't have to worry about all of that.*

While Amy and Sarah were worried about distance to travel in winter weather, other
participants commented about the distance they have to travel in relation to the cost of gas. Renee, who lives 30 minutes away from campus, found online courses “appealing” as they allowed her to minimize gas costs. She explained,

*I have to travel about 30 minutes one way to my college campus. Online classes were very appealing because of this. During my initial set of classes was when gas prices were extremely high. Knowing I would have to pay "X" dollars every week was definitely a deciding factor in my decision.*

Meredith commented on the cost of gas and “not being able to pay for gas to travel 40-50 miles [per day] five days a week.” She went on to say, “I can drive a few days a week—but I cannot really afford to drive four or five days which is why I am taking a hybrid course next semester.”

Cindy not only mentioned the cost of gas when commenting on geographical location but also indicated there is only one car in her household, so enrolling in online courses are more conducive to her situation. She said,

*Since I live about 55 miles away from campus, online classes are much easier to attend. There would be a lot of travel and early mornings or late nights when I would have to drive that distance [if I were taking face-to-face courses]. In a time when money is tight, I don't have to pay for gas to drive an hour and a half to school one way. We only have one vehicle right now, so it's more convenient.*

**Meaning of Online Student to Participants**

This section explores the meaning participants give to being an online student. Findings illustrate that being an online student means a great deal to participants.
Ability to Do it All

Being an online student allowed participants not only to pursue an education but allowed participants to fulfill their multiple roles as well. It was important for participants to be able to fulfill their multiple roles while being students. Meredith said,

*Being an online student means (to me) being able to fulfill my educational goals. I do not believe it prevented me from doing anything except having the extra socialization I get from face-to-face classes. It does mean more time with my family-especially my two-year-old [child]. It means that I was able to be a full-time mother and student at the same time; might have been hard, but worth it to be with my child.*

Tracy also echoed the importance of being able to fulfill multiple roles while pursuing an education. She shared,

*Being able to stay home while getting an education is so amazing and so almost a blessing because I don’t have to sacrifice time with my [child] to do it. I can be at home and watch [child] grow up and can see [child] reach milestones, but I can be working on a 5 page research paper at the same time.*

Participants appreciated being able to fulfill their multiple roles while being a student.

A Sense of Pride and Accomplishment

Being an online student has allowed participants to feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. This sense of pride and accomplishment was related to completing online courses as well as attaining a degree. As participants discovered, being an online student takes more time and dedication than being a face-to-face student due to the nature of online courses. To successfully complete online courses is something to be proud of. Participants also recognize that their lives consist of multiple roles that have multiple responsibilities, and
to attain a degree at the same time they are fulfilling their roles provides a sense of accomplishment. Erika shared,

*Being an online student has had the same impact on me that I imagine being a campus student would. It has given me confidence in my abilities to learn, and my ability to create a better future for my family. I CAN accomplish anything! The impact that being an online student has had, is, well, if I wasn’t an online student, I wouldn’t be a student at all.*

Tracy commented, “*Being an online student means that I can still get an education and actually become somebody that not only I can be proud of, but also somebody that my whole family can be proud of.*” Tracy felt a sense of pride for herself and recognized that her educational accomplishments also make her family proud. As a result of enrolling in online courses Debra recognized her success as an online student is due to her abilities. She said,

*Being an online student means that I can take pride in personal achievement. I know that I worked hard and gained knowledge with limited input from others. By limited I mean that I don't always have that back and forth interaction that I would get in an in person class. I have to decipher information in my own head.*

Debra has to work on her own to learn as much as she can from her courses, and this dedication provides a feeling of accomplishment for her. The sense of pride and accomplishment helped the women persevere.

**A Better Life**

Enrolling in online courses contributed to each participant’s pursuit of an education and ultimately attaining a degree. Degree attainment is important to the participants because they see degree attainment contributing to a better life for both them and their families.
Participants described a better life in terms of having a career rather than a job, obtaining better paying jobs which will increase financial resources, and providing opportunities and experiences for their children.

Erika’s family serves as her motivation for seeking a degree as she wants to provide a better life for her children. She explained,

*Being an online student means I can really get to the point in life I want to be. It means I can improve my financial situation down the road. I want to give my children more than I had. I want to be able to afford to send to college right out of high school. I want them to have a yard to play in.*

Tracy not only saw degree attainment as contributing to a better life, but as being necessary for her to have a career rather than a job. Tracy commented,

*Getting a degree contributes to a better life because I can be more than a [current occupation]. I can help support my family and don't have to worry about paying my bills or my family not having enough to eat*”.

Cindy desires to contribute to the family household and by completing her degree she will be able to obtain a job that allows her to do so. She stated, “*I think my degree will add financial stability for my husband and I. It will make me feel like I'm pulling my weight and not just letting him do all the work.*”

Participants value and appreciate education and benefits associated with holding a degree. Enrolling in online courses allowed participants to pursue an education, but made the educational pursuit more manageable.
CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

Summary of Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand how adult women attending rural community colleges experience being online students. As enrollment in online courses continues to grow every year (Allen & Seaman, 2010) and as women are more likely to enroll in online courses (Kramarae, 2001; van Prummer, 2011), a study focusing on how adult college women experience being an online student was warranted due to the paucity of research on this topic. This study benefits multiple entities including community colleges, departments and offices involved with delivery or administration of online courses, and current and future online students.

Participants were recruited from two rural community colleges, both that are member institutions of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium. Criteria for study participation included: 1) adult college women who were 25 years of age or older and 2) adult college women who had minimally taken three asynchronous online courses. Data were collected through a series of five interviews conducted via e-mail over a four-month period. Each interview focused on exploring various aspects of the online experience including: 1) factors which motivated participants to enroll in online courses, 2) expectations regarding online courses and being an online student and then what the experience was really like, 3) how being a woman impacted the online experience, how various personal identities such as mother, spouse, employee impacted the experience, how geographical location impacted the experience, and 4) what being an online student meant to participants. A total of 10 women enrolled at the same community college completed the interview process.
Findings

The following research question guided this study: How do adult college women attending a rural community college experience being an online student? To answer this question, the following sub-questions were asked:

Research Question #1. What factors motivated participants to enroll in online courses?

This question sought to understand factors that motivated participants to enroll in online courses. As women are more likely to enroll in online courses (Kramarae, 2001; van Prummer, 2011), it is important to understand what factors contribute to women’s decision-making process to enroll in online courses. Previous research (Furst-Bowe, 2002; Kramarae, 2001) found that women enrolled in online courses in order to balance work, family, and community obligations with being a student. Kramarae (2001) gathered information from 534 people utilizing in-depth interviews and surveys to understand how women experience online education. One of the study’s findings was that women enroll in online courses because of the flexibility they provide. Kramarea (2001) stated, “Women who mention flexibility state that distance learning allows them to fit education into their work and family schedules, rather than trying to fit their lives into the schedules of traditional education” (p. 11). Furst-Bowe (2002) conducted a study to understand the needs of adult women in distance learning programs and found that women enroll in online courses because “the courses offered them much greater flexibility as they juggled work, family, and educational responsibilities” (p. 85).

Consistent with Kramarae (2001) and Furst-Bowe (2002), results from this dissertation study indicated that the majority of participants enrolled in online courses
because doing so allowed them to fulfill life, familial, and work responsibilities. This is evident by Sarah’s comment,

*The biggest reason that I enrolled in the online courses was because I needed to be able to stay working full-time and I also had a small child. By completing my classes online I could do them whenever I had free time such as when my [child] was napping or even if I had time during work hours.*

Amy also commented that she sought out online courses because she needed to continue working full-time and be able to fulfill her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Amy stated, “I have two small kids and a full-time job so when I decided to go back to school I knew I wouldn’t be able to go the more traditional route.” Erin’s life circumstances also prompted her to enroll in online courses. Erin commented,

*I needed to take courses that would work with my current work schedule and also my family. I work full time as a [job title] from 8-4 and then I also have a husband and 3 kids, so I have many obligations during the waking hours :) I needed to be able to access the material at a time when I had no other commitments and could concentrate.*

While the majority of participants cited life circumstances as the primary reasons for enrolling in online courses, they were not the only factors that prompted participants to enroll in online courses. In Debra’s case she enrolled in her first online course because the course was required and only offered in an online format. Debra discovered she liked the flexibility online courses provided and enrolled in several more online courses. Debra shared, “I took more online courses because I liked being able to set my own pace within my busy schedule, I could work, raise a family, and earn a degree at the same time.” While Debra did not
initially enroll in online courses as a means to manage her multiple roles, she realized that enrolling in online courses would allow her to manage her roles. In Meredith’s case, she wanted to continue as a full-time student during the summer as she did not want to lose her momentum and motivation for being a student. In order to continue as a full-time student, Meredith had to enroll in online courses, as her community college does not offer many face-to-face courses in the summer. Meredith did not enroll in online courses because she was seeking a way to balance her multiple roles, but did come to realize that enrolling in online courses did assist in the balancing of roles. Meredith pointed out,

*Being an online student gave me more time to be at home with my family. It also freed up some of my time so I was able to take my [children] to appointments and/or school activities that I may have otherwise missed (if I were in a classroom). Being an online student helped relieve my husband of the task of staying at home with sick children and going to appointments. It saved my family on the financial costs of me driving to and from [community college], and the costs of daycare.*

While neither Debra nor Meredith intentionally enrolled in online courses due to life circumstances, both recognized that online courses provided a way to manage their multiple roles more easily. It should be noted that even though Meredith did not have a positive online experience, she did recognize how enrolling in online courses can assist in managing multiple roles.

In short, the factors that motivated participants to enroll in online courses centered on the necessity of participants to continue fulfilling multiple roles and responsibilities as well as course availability while desiring to remain on track academically.
Research Question #2. What expectations did participants have about online courses and being an online student prior to becoming an online student? What was the reality of their experience? Were expectations and actual experience congruent?

The purpose of this question was to both understand what, if any, perceptions or expectations participants had about being an online student and what the actual experience of being an online student was like. By understanding both the reality of the online student experience as well as initial student perceptions regarding online courses and the online student experience institutions will be better able to inform and educate potential online students as well as faculty and staff members who work with online students.

A number of studies have explored student perceptions and expectations as they relate to online courses and the online student experience. Howland and Moore (2002) conducted a study with the purpose of understanding graduate students’ perceptions of online courses and their learning experiences within these courses. One of the findings was that participants “initial perceptions about online courses were quite different from what they experienced” (p. 190). Participants “anticipated that they would be setting their own schedules, working individually, and turning in assignments only by the end of the course” (p. 190). The reality of the experience was very different in that the online courses had structured due dates and group projects were incorporated into the online courses. Bambara, Harbour, Gray Davies, and Athey (2009) found that community college students enrolled in online courses also had inaccurate perceptions of what online courses would be like and what being an online student would entail. Participants anticipated that online courses “would be a breeze” (p. 226) and quickly discovered they “were far more complex and difficult than they had expected” (p. 226).
In another study, Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw (2006) sought to better understand the expectations and needs of undergraduate students enrolled in industrial education courses. The researchers simply posed an open-ended question asking participants what their expectations and needs as online students were. The top three expectations of online students included: 1) communication with the professor, 2) instructor feedback, and 3) challenging online courses. The top four needs of online students included: 1) technical help, 2) flexible understanding instructors, 3) advance course information, and 4) sample assignments.

Participants in this dissertation study also held inaccurate perceptions about online courses and what being an online student would entail. Prior to enrolling in online courses and becoming online students, a number of participants commented they thought online courses would be easier than face-to-face courses, would not require a great deal of time or effort on their part, and would be self-paced in that assignment could be completed at any time during the course delivery period. Meredith, Sarah, and Tracy all commented that they thought online courses would be easy. Meredith summed it up best when she said, “I thought that all online classes were fairly easy. I thought I would breeze through the classes and get all A’s without much effort.” Sarah and Tracy also commented that they thought online courses would not require a significant amount of time on their part. Sarah exemplified this perception when she said, “I really thought that I could spend maybe an hour a week doing class work and that would be it.” Debra and Renee commented they thought they would be able to submit assignments and complete tests at any time during the course. Renee said, “I thought the time frame would be strictly my own and that I would have the whole semester to complete tests, quizzes, assignments whenever I wanted.”
Participants, who expected online courses and being an online student “would be a breeze,” quickly discovered that their perceptions were inaccurate. Participants who had inaccurate perceptions did not appear to be upset or disappointed that their perceptions were inaccurate. Participants appeared to appreciate that online courses were not easier and did, in fact, require time and effort. Tracy captured this sentiment when she said,

*They [online courses] are more like a face-to-face class then I originally thought. I can't slack off and screw around and maintain a decent grade in my online classes, which is good for me because it makes me work harder and focus more on my studies. I like that with my online classes I am forced to actually read the chapters and pay attention if I want to pass the class.*

There were a few participants, however, who thought online courses would be demanding and time intensive. This was due in part to information about online courses and online programs that was communicated by staff members to participants. For example, Kimberly, who is enrolled in a program of study that is delivered entirely online, had been told it was not recommended to enroll in this particular online program of study and have a full-time job due to the program’s intensity. Even though Kimberly had been told about the programs intensity she was not prepared for how demanding and time consuming her classes actually are. Kimberly reported she spends 10 hours per day on her classes. Erika also was told that online courses are demanding and time intensive. Erika has been told she should anticipate spending 10 hours per week per online course. Erika reported she spends anywhere between 60-70 hours per week on classes.

Most participants described their online experience positively. Debra said, “*Over all it has been a great experience. I have learned a lot from the courses I have taken.*” Amy
commented, “My experience as an online student is definitely positive. I'm learning alot and I know it's all stuff I can apply to future employment.” Kimberly shared, “My experience has been great (although very stressful!). I love taking classes online and am glad I am doing the same next semester.”

While most participants described their online experience positively, there were a few participants who described their experiences less favorably. Meredith did not have “a great experience as an online student” as she had enrolled in three eight-week summer online courses. The condensed format coupled with not having any prior online experience led Meredith to feel “very stressed” and “overwhelmed.” Renee described her online experience as being “so-so.” This is because Renee questioned how much she learned in one of her online courses. Renee started to question her learning as a result of an experience she had in a face-to-face course in which material from a previous online course was reviewed. During the review Renee realized she “couldn't go in depth on most things.” Renee’s questioning of her learning illustrates Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw’s (2006) finding that students do want online courses to be challenging.

Several participants described frustrating experiences they have had with online instructors. Some of the issues described included: instructors who did not respond in a timely manner to questions or concerns, instructors who did not grade promptly, and instructors who were not sensitive to life issues. Tracy described an incident where she had e-mailed her instructor with a question about an assignment and the instructor did not answer Tracy until the day after the assignment, which was 3-4 days after Tracy had sent the initial e-mail. Amy described an experience in which an instructor did not return homework assignments before administering tests, which made it difficult for students to know what
content areas they did or did not understand. Tracy described an incident in which the local phone company in her community was “messing with the lines” and as a result there was no Internet. As a result, Tracy was not able to submit an assignment and when she asked the instructor if she could submit it late because of the circumstances she was told no. From these comments it is evident that participants expected online instructors to respond to student questions and concerns in a timely manner, to grade assignments promptly, and to be flexible and understanding of life issues. These instructor expectations mirror the instructor expectations from the Mupinga et al. (2006) study.

To summarize, participants held a variety of perceptions and expectations regarding online courses. Some participants thought online courses would be easy while other participants thought online courses would be difficult. Once enrolled in online courses participants found that online courses are demanding and time intensive. Most participants described their online student experience positively. Two participants did not describe their online experience positively. Expectations relating to online instructors were also discussed.

Research Question #3. How did various identities impact/influence the online student experience? Specifically, how did being a woman, how did multiple roles, and geographical location impact/influence being an online student?

The purpose of this question was to ascertain how various identities impacted participant’s experience as online students. Because this study focused on adult college women attending a rural community college it was determined to pose questions focusing on gender, multiple roles participants held, and geographical location.

In order to provide context to understand the findings from these questions, it is necessary to review identity theory and role strain theory. Identity theory (Stryker, 1968)
explains the relationship between one’s identity and one’s behavior. Identity is defined as “meanings attached to the self by self and others” (Gecas & Burke, 1995, p. 42). An individual’s identity is complex and has many meanings. Complexity in the self is manifested through multiple roles individuals hold. For each role a person holds there is a corresponding identity. Roles identities “are meanings one attributes to oneself in a role and that others attribute to one” (Burke & Reitzes, 1981, p. 84). A person’s role identities are organized into a salience hierarchy (Stryker, 1968; Stryker, 1980/2002). A salient identity is an identity that is most likely to be activated or enacted across various situations (Stryker, 1980/2002). Identity salience is influenced by how committed or not committed one is to the role identity (Stryker, 1980/2002). The more committed one is to a role identity, the more salient that role identity is. Likewise the less committed one is to a role identity the less salient that role identity is.

As individuals possess multiple roles it is inevitable for individuals to experience role strain. Role strain is “the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations” (Goode, 1960, p. 483). Role theorists have delineated three dimensions of role strain including, role conflict, role overload, and role contagion.

Findings from this dissertation study indicate that participants did not necessarily identify as being a woman (which is how the interview question was phrased). Participants fell into one of four categories when asked how being a woman impacted their online student experience. The four categories included: 1) had not considered how being a woman impacted their online experience, 2) being a woman had no impact on their online experience, 3) being a woman produced contradictory responses, and 4) being a woman did impact participants online student experience.
Erika and Meredith commented they had not considered how being a woman impacted their online experience. After thinking about the question, Erika commented she has not experienced any sexism in her online courses, which suggests she interpreted the interview question in terms of discrimination or discriminatory practices in the classroom in relation to being a woman. Meredith, after thinking about the interview question, commented that perhaps being a woman and the roles associated with being a woman (i.e., mother, spouse) might have contributed to her being overwhelmed while enrolled in online courses. Meredith reflected,

*I think being a woman and an online student may have played a part in my being overwhelmed with the online classes I have taken. I was not able to be away at a college during my courses. I don't think I put as great of a concentration on my studies as I do when I am in a classroom because I was focused on other things--like my toddler, 2 step-[children], house work, and appointments."

Cindy and Kimberly commented that being a woman has no impact on their experience. Cindy lives in a multi-generational home and as a result does not need to worry about household chores as she would if she and her husband lived in a single-family household as other family members attend to the household chores. Kimberly simply stated, "I honestly don't feel like being a woman has any bearing on my experience as an online student."

Amy, Erin, and Tracy provided contradictory statements when answering the interview question. That is, they initially commented that being a woman had no impact on their online student experience but then made comments indicating how being a woman did
impact their experience. Erin, for example, initially said being a woman has no impact on the online student experience as both men and women experience online courses the same way. Upon further reflection, however, Erin went on to say that being a woman does impact her experience. She said,

*I guess I think that being a woman does impact my learning because I feel a great amount of responsibility to do well, but also to cater to my family’s needs first. Harder for me to shut off mom mode than I think it would be for my husband.*

Renee, Debra, and Sarah indicated that being a woman does impact their online student experience. For Sarah, it was because she was a woman that she enrolled in online courses. She said,

*I’m not entirely sure that gender has much of an influence on my experience with online classes. I would more say that it had an influence on the decision to TAKE the classes because I had to continue to be wife and mom and still work in order for my family to function.*

During data analysis it became clear that this question—how does being a woman impact your online student experience—was interpreted in multiple ways based on the multiple responses received. One possible reason for the diversity in responses could be that “being a woman” was not defined nor were any prompts provided when the question was posed. Because a definition was not provided, each woman answered the question according to her own self-definition of what being a woman meant. The variety in answers is illustrative that being a woman has multiple meanings and understandings. A second possible reason for the range of responses could be a function of participant age. For example, Debra clearly stated that being a woman does impact her online experience as
evidenced through her “feminine” discussion board posts. Debra is in her mid thirties (was the second oldest study participant) and as such has had more life experiences than other participants and as a result may see herself as a woman and how being a woman impacts and influences one’s experiences.

In comparison, participants’ multiple roles and ensuing role identities were much more salient than the broad societal identity of woman. Participants readily identified and acknowledged the impact their multiple roles had on their online student experience. Participants held multiple roles including wife or partner, mother, employee, sister, aunt, and friend. Each role that is held has a corresponding identity. Identity theory (Stryker, 1968; Stryker 1980/2002) posits that these identities are organized into a salience hierarchy in which the most salient identity is the identity most likely to be enacted. Of the multiple roles and role identities held by participants, the role identities of mother and/or wife or partner were most salient. Participants manifested identity saliency verbally and behaviorally,

A few participants indicated their mother or spousal role identities were most salient by statements they made. Meredith, for example, stated, “When being an online student I placed a greater amount of importance on my role as spouse and mother.” Erin also stated that her “mom role comes first.” A far greater number of participants demonstrated that their mother and/or spousal roles were salient through their actions. Actions that demonstrated identity saliency included: enrolling in online courses and developing a system to manage role identities.

It can be argued that it was because of salient identities as mothers and spouses that participants enrolled in online courses. The basis for this line of thinking is that the majority of participants commented it was because of their life circumstances and multiple roles that
they enrolled in online courses. Several participants reiterated the necessity of enrolling in online courses because of their role identities as wives and mothers and the need to attend to these roles. Renee commented,

*It was because of those roles that online classes fit the best for me. As a mother, I still had the time to spend with my children; I could pick my [child] up from school, attend his school functions. I felt that my role as a student didn't interfere with that of my children. As a spouse, I felt the same way. My husband was more than willing to accommodate my schedule. But taking online classes definitely allowed me to spend more time with him as well.*

Participants also developed systems to manage their multiple role identities. Participant’s commitment to their mother and/or spousal role identities is clearly evident in that the systems developed ensure that participants’ mother and/or spousal roles are minimally impacted by their student role. The systems developed required participants to do homework late at night when household members were sleeping or when children were in school and spouses were at work. For example, Renee, Meredith, Amy, and Tracy all commented they do school work after everyone in the household has gone to bed. Amy stated, “I make it a point to only do my school work and house work when they [my children] are sleeping or otherwise occupied with certain toys.” Meredith also stated, “I usually have to do my homework when everyone goes to bed.”

Multiple roles led participants to experience role strain or “the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations” (Goode, 1960, p. 483). All participants experienced role strain. Participants experienced the most role strain between their salient role identities as mothers and/or spouses and their student role. Participants indicated feeling pulled between their
multiple roles. It is and was a constant struggle to manage their roles and ensuing responsibilities. Debra captured the challenge of managing multiple roles when she said,

*It’s tough some days! My schedule changes from day to day and I usually balance deadlines at school, work, and home constantly. If I have assignments due we have a not so fabulous dinner at home that night, but I make up for it on another night. When juggling you never fully give your attention to any one area because you have to be mindful of all of the others at the same time.*

Participants clearly experienced two dimensions of role strain. Specifically, role overload and role conflict were experienced by participants. Role overload or “having too many role demands and too little time to fulfill them” (Coverman, 1989, p. 967) was the most prevalent form of role strain exhibited by participants. It is not surprising that role overload is the most prevalent form of role strain when one considers the nature of role overload. Participants held multiple roles such as mothers, spouses and/or partners, employees, students, sisters, aunts, and friends. Each of these roles comes with responsibilities, and while some roles are more demanding than others, each role held has responsibilities. Role overload can be seen in Amy’s comment of “*I thought I would lose my mind trying to keep up with things around the house and my job and school.*” Each of these roles that Amy mentioned are demanding, and it is challenging to fulfill the demands each role carries. As a result of role overload, participants sacrifice sleep and/or less salient roles. Several participants indicated they get a minimal amount of sleep in their attempt to fulfill their roles. Tracy, matter of factly said, “*this cuts down on my sleep, but oh well.*” Participants seemed to take sacrificing sleep in stride. It was just “something” one did in order to fulfill multiple roles in a limited time frame. Roles that were not salient were also impacted by role overload.
in that those roles were not fulfilled. For example, participants commented that their interactions with friends decreased or their level of involvement in community activities decreased, as they needed to spend their time on their more demanding roles.

Participants also exhibited role contagion or the “preoccupation with one role while performing another” (Home, 1998, p. 336). Again, it is not surprising that participant would be preoccupied with one role while performing another role. Participants held multiple roles and many of the roles held are accompanied by demanding responsibilities. When performing one role rather than performing an equally demanding role it is inevitable to be preoccupied with the role that is not being performed as more than likely it is the role that is next to be performed. Erin’s comment about “multiple roles makes it a little harder to actually grasp the content of the classes because my mind is many other places too” is indicative of role contagion as it describes being preoccupied with other roles while performing the student role. Role contagion can also be seen in Amy’s comment stating, “I do have to straighten my mind out and remind myself not to worry about school while working and not to worry about work while I’m trying to read or study for school”. Amy’s comment also indicates being preoccupied with her student role while performing her employee role and then being preoccupied with her employee role while she is performing her student role.

Lastly, participants fell into one of two categories when asked how their geographical location impacted their online student experience. The two categories included: 1) geographical location had no impact on online experience and 2) geographical location did impact online experience. Debra, Meredith, and Kimberly perceived that geographical location had no impact on their experience as online students. Each of the three participants
live within a close proximity to the institution they are attending which may be why they do not perceive their geographical location impacting their experience. For Meredith, reliable Internet access is most important to her online experience, as it is what allows her to be an online student. She stated, “Location isn’t a big impact. We are able to access the internet and that is the main thing.” Debra indicated that close proximity to the community college allows her to easily access and use the institution’s computers should she encounter any difficulties with her home computer.

The majority of participants indicated that their geographical location does impact their experience. Participants indicated distance to travel to campus, gas costs, and traveling during winter weathers were factors that contributed to their decision to enroll in online courses. In addition, one participant commented there was only one car in her household and as such online courses were better suited for her circumstances. Another participant commented that lack of a quality childcare center was an issue for her and therefore online courses were more attractive.

In brief, participants’ various identities influenced their online experience. Identity associated with multiple roles had the most impact, as the saliency of multiple role identities made online courses more attractive and manageable than face-to-face courses. Participants’ discussion of impacts of their identity as women was more ambiguous. Some participants said being a woman had no impact on their online experience, while others indicated being a woman influenced their experience as an online student. Other participants provided contradictory responses claiming being a woman has no impact, but offering examples of how being a woman did impact their experience. Two participants said they had never thought of how being a woman could impact their online experience. Identity based on rural
location had a lesser impact for participants who lived closer to the institution, but distance, winter driving, and transportation costs influenced those who lived further from campus.

**Research Question #4. What did being an online student mean to participants?**

The intent of this question was to understand what being an online student and enrolling in online courses meant to participants. By understanding how participants made meaning of their online experience a more deeper and holistic understanding of the experience emerged.

Participants indicated being an online student means and has meant a great deal to participants. First, enrolling in online courses not only allowed participants to pursue an education, but more importantly, allowed participants to fulfill their multiple roles while being students. Meredith reflected,

> **Being an online student means (to me) being able to fulfill my educational goals. I do not believe it prevented me from doing anything except having the extra socialization I get from face-to-face classes. It does mean more time with my family—especially my two-year-old [child]. It means that I was able to be a full-time mother and student at the same time. [It] might have been hard, but worth it to be with my child.**

Second, enrolling in online courses has aided participants in their quest for degree attainment. Degree attainment is important to participants as they see degree attainment contributing to a better life for both them and their families. Participants described a better life in terms of securing a better job which will bring in added financial resources, as having a career rather than a job, and providing opportunities and experiences for their children. Amy shared,
I'm hoping it [degree attainment] will provide more financial stability. We are doing okay now but with the economy and rising cost of childcare, I'm hoping it [degree attainment] will provide more wiggle room for us to be able to do more things with the kids instead of just working to give them what they need vs. what we would like for them to have.

Amy also said, “I’m hoping it [degree attainment] will give me a career instead of a job—something I can do forever instead of until the next thing comes along.” Kimberly stated, “We will be better off financially when I can put school to good use and get a better job.”

Third, participants reported a sense of pride and accomplishment while being online students. This sense of pride and accomplishment was related to both being an online student as well as working towards degree attainment. Participants recognize that their lives consist of multiple roles that have multiple responsibilities and to attain a degree at the same time they are fulfilling their roles provides a sense of accomplishment. As Tracy shared, “Being an online student mean that I can still get an education and actually become somebody that not only I can be proud of, but also someone that my whole family can be proud of.”

Enrolling in online courses aided participants in their pursuit of an education. It is clear that participants value education as evident by the constant role strain they experience. Participants willingly juggle multiple roles and responsibilities, sacrifice sleep, social lives, all in their quest for an education. Participants are well aware of the financial gains that degree attainment provides, but also recognize the intangible benefits that also accompany degree attainment.
Revisiting Theory

Two theories, Feminist standpoint theory (FST) and identity theory were used in this dissertation study. FST posits that in order to better understand the world and societal workings it is necessary that women and their experiences be studied (Harding, 1993/2004). FST also posits that social location influences how one experiences that world and how the world interacts with the individual. Social location “refers to a person’s position (and the intersection of positions) where race, class, gender, and other constantly shifting social group formations that exist within a network of political and economic power relations, define position” (Zaytoun, 2006, p. 69). The use of FST is evident in this dissertation study as the study intentionally focused on women and how they experience being online students. The social location of gender was central to this study as evident by interview questions focusing on how being a woman and how multiple roles as mothers/care takers, wives/partners, employers/employees influenced how participants experienced being online students. These questions were necessary to better understand how women as women experience being online students.

Identity theory (Stryker, 1968) explains the relationship between one’s identity and one’s behavior. For each role a person hold there is a corresponding identity. These identities are organized into a salience hierarchy in which the most salient identity is the identity most likely to be enacted. Identity salience is influenced by how committed one is to a role identity (Stryker, 1968).

Identity theory illustrates why participants multiple role identities were most salient. Of the multiple role identities held by participants, the role identities of mother and/or wife or partner were most salient. These roles were most salient because participants were most
committed to these roles resulting in these roles being at the top of the salience hierarchy. While this study did not measure level of commitment per se, it is evident that participants are committed to their mother and/or wife or partner identities. Commitment to these roles is manifested by participants’ decision to enroll in online courses and by participants’ decision to do classwork and/or homework after the entire household has retired for the evening.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Recommendations for practice abound from this study. This study sought to understand how adult college women attending a rural community college experienced being an online student. Based on the findings from this study, several recommendations can be made to community colleges, academic departments who offer online course, and students enrolled in online courses or who are considering enrolling in online courses.

**Recommendations for Community Colleges**

At a broad institutional level, community colleges should consider the following recommendations:

1. Community colleges need to be aware of what online education entails in order to provide the necessary infrastructure and resources to support both faculty who teach online courses and students who enroll in online courses. By understanding what online education entails institutions will be able to make informed decisions as it relates to necessary and needed resources in order to insure the successful implementation and/or successful continuation of online course delivery for both the institution and students.

2. Community colleges need to know who their online students are and understand how they experience being an online student. Community colleges can gain this
knowledge through administering student surveys, conducting student focus groups, speaking with college employees who interact with online students (i.e., advisors, student affairs professionals, and faculty members). By understanding who their online students are, community colleges can make informed decisions regarding policy development and standards of practice as it relates to online education. For example, based on findings from this dissertation study, community colleges would be aware of the impact multiple roles have on adult college women’s online student experience. This knowledge could then inform how advisors and faculty members advise adult college women when they inquire about online education. In addition, by understanding who their online students are, community colleges would also learn what is working well and not working well in the online classroom and can address concerns and issues accordingly.

3. Community colleges need to ensure that online education is addressed in the institutions strategic plan.

**Recommendations for Academic Divisions/Departments**

At the divisional or departmental level, academic deans, chairs, and directors should consider the following recommendations:

1. Academic departments need to ensure that online faculty members are well-equipped and well prepared to teach a course online. Teaching online is different than teaching face-to-face, and it would behoove academic departments to offer online teaching workshops to those faculty members who teach online or wish to teach online. Such workshops could include the following topics: who are our online students, designing online courses, importance of screen presence and communication, and best online
Several participants from this study shared their frustrations about faculty members who did not respond to student e-mails in a timely fashion, who did not provide grades and/or assignment feedback before the next assignment was due, and who “disappeared” from class. By participating in such workshops online faculty members would become knowledgeable about the pedagogy of online teaching.

2. Academic departments need to ensure that online courses are aesthetically pleasing when viewed on the computer screen by students. It is important that students are able to easily read and see the materials on the computer screen as it is through the computer screen that students engage with course content. In this study, one participant specifically mentioned her frustration with “messy courses” when she said, “the slide shows are not put together properly so graphics are covering some of the notes.” Related, online courses should incorporate “universal design” to ensure that all students regardless of age, (dis)abilities, or learning styles are able to participate in online courses. For example, a corresponding transcript should accompany any lecture clips used in online courses. Similarly, online instructors need to be cognizant of what color font or graphic they use in their online courses as students who are color blind may have difficulty seeing and/or differentiating particular colors. Universal design is particularly beneficial for adult students whose eye sight and hearing may not be as sharp as it is for younger students.

3. If an academic program is delivered entirely online or if required courses in a program are only delivered online, it would be beneficial to facilitate student meetings on what online courses are like and what online courses entail. Most study participants indicated they did not know what online courses entailed and what being
an online student would be like. Participants initially thought online courses would be easy, would not require a great deal of time or energy on their part, and they would be able to submit assignments whenever they wanted to. Participants quickly learned that the reality of online courses was very different than what they had initially thought. Hosting student meetings would provide an avenue for academic departments to inform and educate potential online students about what being an online student entails. Academic departments may also want to consider developing a demo online course to allow potential online students to see what an online course is like and what being an online student entails. While this recommendation benefits all potential online students it will particularly benefit adult college women who need to understand the demands of online education in light of the multiple roles and responsibilities they hold.

4. Academic departments need to review course evaluation forms to insure that such forms are tailored for online courses. Course evaluations provide valuable information not only to assess course content and course assignments but also to assess instructor interaction. To properly assess an online course and online instructor it is important for the course evaluation form to be tailored accordingly. Information from course evaluations could be another source of information in understanding who online students are, if there are any issues and/or concerns academic departments needs to be aware of, and if online courses are meeting the needs of students.

5. Academic departments need to ensure that academic advisors are well versed about online courses offered at their institution as well as what being an online student
entails. Advisors need to be knowledgeable in order to advise students appropriately. While it is important for advisors to advise all students appropriately, it is especially important that advisors understand adult college women, the multiple roles they often hold, and how those roles can and do impact the online student experience. Only two study participants commented that their advisors advised them properly about online courses and their demanding nature. Not only do academic advisors need to be knowledgeable about online courses, but also they need to be aware of any policies specific to online courses. For example, some online courses are delivered in a condensed format (e.g., four weeks, six weeks, eight weeks) and may therefore have different add or drop dates than the traditional semester-long courses.

**Recommendation for Faculty**

At the faculty level, faculty members should consider the following recommendations:

1. Faculty members need to participate in any and all online teaching workshops and professional development opportunities so they are prepared to teach online courses. The better prepared faculty members are to teach online courses the better the online experience for students. Teaching online is different than teaching face-to-face and participating in online teaching workshops is one way faculty members can prepare themselves. Reading journals and/or books devoted to online education and/or online teaching can also be helpful to faculty members as they teach online. When I began teaching online I found the book *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide* (Ko & Rossen, 2008) to be helpful.
2. Faculty members need to understand that adult college women hold multiple roles and have multiple responsibilities. While designing online courses faculty members need to be cognizant that adult college women hold multiple roles and as a result some class assignments may be more difficult for adult college women to complete. For example, assignments involving group work may be more challenging for adult women to participate in because of their tight schedules for doing classwork. Erin commented that she appreciated not having any group work because of the difficulty she would have in coordinating her available time with others.

3. Faculty members need to understand that adult college women hold multiple roles and because of these multiple roles an adult college woman may have a family emergency and/or a work emergency which arises and prevents them from completing an assignment by the due date. Faculty members need to be sensitive to these situations and if possible, work with the adult student in allowing the assignment to be submitted.

**Recommendations for Students**

At the student level, adult college students should consider the following recommendations:

1. Adult college women need to have an understanding of what being an online student entails—preferably before they become an online student. This can be accomplished by talking with other adult college women who have taken online courses, by meeting with their academic advisor, and by meeting with the faculty member who teaches that particular online course. When meeting with these various constituencies, adult
college women need to specifically inquire about the feasibility of enrolling in online courses in conjunction with their multiple roles.

2. Adult college women need to discuss with family members what being an online student entails. Adult college women need to have frank discussions with family members about their multiple roles and responsibilities and how those multiple roles and responsibilities may be impacted by online course and how online course may impact their multiple roles. This study illustrates the benefit of complying with this recommendation as participants readily spoke about the challenge of managing all their multiple roles and feeling pulled in multiple directions.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Numerous recommendations for future research can be made based upon this dissertation study. This study focused on how adult women attending a rural community college experienced being an online student in asynchronous online courses. To further explore and understand how adult college women experience being an online student, future studies could be designed to explore female experiences in synchronous courses as well as hybrid courses. Related, further studies could also explore adult college women’s online experiences by various institutional types including: 4-year institutions, proprietary institutions, and other types of community colleges (i.e. city, suburban, and town).

While this study utilized the lenses of gender and geographical location to better understand how adult women attending rural community colleges, future studies could be designed using other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, and (dis)ability to understand how student’s social location impacts their online experience. There is evidence that research focusing on various identity markers is being conducted. Huerta (2011) conducted a
dissertation study focusing on the educational persistence of online Latina doctoral students. Moore (2011) also conducted a dissertation study focusing on the experiences of international students enrolled in Texas community colleges.

Future studies can also be designed to further explore role strain as it relates to adult women enrolled in online courses. Most studies to date have focused on role strain in women enrolled in face-to-face courses. Those studies (Home 1997, 1998; Johnson, Schwartz, Bower, 2000) have found that adult college women in face-to-face courses experience high role strain. The participants in this study also experienced high role strain as illustrated by their statements about being pulled in multiple directions due to their multiple roles and the challenge they face in managing those multiple roles. While it is clear that study participants experienced high role strain this study, this dissertation study did not explore role strain in depth.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, this study focused on adult college women attending rural community colleges in the Midwest and their experiences may or may not be similar to adult college women in other geographical regions. Second, this study focused on students enrolled in asynchronous online courses. It is possible that enrollment in synchronous online courses or hybrid courses may yield different experiences. Third, this study employed online research methods and as a result may have attracted a particular type of participant. If this study had employed face-to-face research methods, it is possible that another type of participant may have been attracted to the study. It is possible that this difference in participants may contribute to different experiences. Fourth, by conducting
interviews via e-mail, participant responses may have been more succinct and brief in their responses than if participants been interviewed face-to-face.

**Final Thoughts**

As I reflect on the experience of this academic exercise I find myself flummoxed. How do I capture the essence of this experience? How do I describe the significance of this experience? As I first-generation college student, I had no idea graduate education even existed. To pursue a doctoral degree, let alone to complete the degree is beyond description.

If I were to choose an analogy to describe my experience, I would choose the analogy of riding a roller coaster. In many ways the dissertation experience was similar to the experience of waiting in line for the roller coaster and then riding the roller coaster. When waiting in line to ride a roller coaster one is able to watch current riders experience the roller coaster before it is their turn to ride the roller coaster. As one moves closer in line one can see the roller coaster in greater detail and see the twists, turns, corkscrew loops, upside down loops, and drops that make up the roller coaster. One is also able to observe riders as they exit the roller coaster and can tell from either body language or verbal comments if the roller coaster was a thrilling ride or one that made them nauseous. After what seems to be an insurmountable time, the line moves forward and it is your turn to ride the roller coaster.

Using the above analogy, waiting in line for the roller coaster and watching others experience the ride was the equivalent of watching fellow classmates conduct their own dissertation studies. I observed classmates during their dissertation experience. I also questioned classmates about their dissertation experiences. I asked if they experienced any unforeseen twists or turns as they conducted their studies. I asked if they had any tips or advice they would share regarding the dissertation process and experience. I asked many
questions of classmates as I wanted to be as prepared as possible for when I began my dissertation. As a result of my observations and questions I learned what conducting dissertation studies entailed, how research studies seldom go as planned, and the necessity of having patience and perseverance during the dissertation process.

While I had seen the roller coaster I was about to ride and knew where the likely twists and turns were, I was nonetheless surprised when I experienced some of those twists and turns. One such twist was the use of online research methods. Because online research methods are not commonly used in research studies (at least not yet) I read many articles and books about online research methods in order to prepare myself to use such methods and to prepare myself for any issues I may encounter. While I had anticipated the use of online research methods to be time intensive I had not anticipated how overwhelming it would be to interview multiple participants, who were at different points in the interview process, at the same time. Because participants were at different stages of the interview process it was challenging at times for me to be present when crafting response e-mails and follow-up questions. It was important for me to build rapport with each participant and to do so I had to be purposeful when writing response e-mails. I wanted each response e-mail to be tailored for each participant. In order to do this I read each participant’s interview question responses at least six times.

I experienced a myriad of emotions throughout the process. I was ecstatic when responses to the recruitment e-mail began coming in. I was excited to have participants! As I got to know the participants and learned all they were doing in their lives I was humbled by their willingness to participate in my study. At one point in the study I forgot to send the next set of interview questions to one participant. I had forgotten to send the interview
questions because I had not made a note of it on my tracking calendar. I did not realize the omission until a week later. Needless to say, I felt horrible and was afraid that I had lost the participant. Fortunately, the participant graciously overlooked the omission and continued in the study.

As any researcher knows, participants are central to the research process as without participants there is no research. I am indebted to the women who participated in my study. Had they not agreed to participate in my study I would not have been able to complete this dissertation. Even though I never met any of my participants I feel that I got to know my participants and was able to understand how the experience being online students. Thank you to Amy, Erika, Kimberly, Renee, Sarah, Tracy, Debra, Meredith, Cindy, and Erin!!

After riding a roller coaster it is not unusual to be asked if one would ride the roller coaster again. This question is asked to gauge one’s reaction to how they experienced the roller coaster. If one did not enjoy the roller coaster a repeat ride is unlikely. If one did enjoy the roller coaster a repeat ride is likely. Using this analogy, if I were asked if I would complete another dissertation my response would be yes. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Participant Recruitment E-Mail

Dear ______________:

My name is Lisa Hetzel and I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies at Iowa State University. I have completed my coursework and am now in the dissertation stage of my program. This means I am at the part of my program in which I need to conduct an original research study. To that end, my research project focuses on how rural women experience asynchronous online courses and being online student.

For this study, I am looking to interview women who meet the following criteria:

- Women who are non-traditional students.
- Women who have minimally taken three asynchronous online courses
- Women who are currently enrolled in a rural community college as defined by the National Center for Education (NCES) and is also a member of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCOC). Such institutions include: Northwest Iowa Community College and Southwestern Community College.

Interviews will be conducted through e-mail. Interview questions will be sent in a series of five e-mails totaling 18 questions. It is possible that additional follow-up and/or clarification e-mails may be sent if I am unclear on a response.

The purpose of the study is to better understand how rural women experience asynchronous online courses. If you choose to participate, I will send you a series of five e-mails asking you about your experiences as an online student and the meaning you have made of your experiences. All information you provide will be kept confidential. Further, participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty.

If you meet these criteria and you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at lheltzel@iastate.edu. If you have any questions or need further information, please contact me at lheltzel@iastate.edu or at 515-450-5159 (H).

Thank you for your interest!

Lisa Hetzel  
Doctoral Student  
Iowa State University  
Ames, IA  
lheltzel@iastate.edu

IRB ID Study Number: 11-344
Appendix B: Informed Consent Document

Title of Study: Rural Women’s Lived Experiences as Online Students
Investigators: Lisa Hetzel, Iowa State University Doctoral Student (lhetzel@iastate.edu)

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION
The purpose of this study is to better understand how rural women experience asynchronous online courses and being an online student. You are being invited to participate in this study because: 1) you are a non-traditional female student, 2) you have minimally taken three asynchronous online courses, and 3) you are currently enrolled in a rural community college as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and is also a member institution of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCOC). Such institutions include Northwest Iowa Community College and Southwestern Community College.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES
If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will consist of answering a series of interview questions delivered via e-mail. The interview questions will be delivered in five separate e-mails. Each e-mail will consist of no more than five interview questions per e-mail. It is possible that additional clarification e-mails may be sent if the researcher needs to clarify an answer. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed: You will be sent a series of five e-mails asking you about your experiences as an online student. You will be asked to respond to interview questions within one week of receiving the interview questions. A reminder e-mail will be sent if a response is not received within one week. After the researcher receives your responses, the next set of interview questions will be sent three days after receiving responses. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable. An electronic copy and hard copy of responses to the interview questions will be kept. The electronic copy will be stripped of any identifying information (i.e. name, e-mail address, etc.) before it is filed/stored on a password protected computer. The hard copy will be kept intact in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home. All data will be deleted/shredded three months after the project is complete.
RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks at this time from participating in this study. If you decide to participate in this study there will not be direct benefit to you other than the opportunity to share your experiences as an online student and what it means to be an online student.

BENEFITS
If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gathered in this study will be useful to you, other rural women enrolled in asynchronous online courses, and to institutions which offer online courses.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION
You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Because this study is being conducted through online interviews, withdrawal from this study will be indicated by e-mailing the researcher (lhetzel@iastate.edu) the statement, “I withdraw from this study.”

CONFIDENTIALITY
Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.
To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: The researcher is the only person that will have access to the data. The data and resulting transcriptions will kept on password protected computers and in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS
You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact the primary investigator: Lisa Hetzel (515-450-5159 or via e-mail at lhetzel@iastate.edu) or Dr. Larry Ebbers (515-294-6393 or via e-mail at lebbers@iastate.edu)
If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE/STATEMENT

Because this informed consent form has been delivered to you via e-mail, I realize it is not possible for you to sign this form. Rather, to indicate you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, the study has been explained to you, you have been given time to read the document, and your questions have been answered, you need to simply reply to this e-mail with a type written response of: I have read the informed consent form and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time without negative effects. My responses confirm my ongoing consent.

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

Upon receipt of your informed consent form, I will send you a receipt confirmation e-mail which states: I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

PARTICIPANT REMINDER:

PLEASE PRINT OFF A COPY OF THIS DOCUMENT FOR YOUR RECORDS

IRB ID Study Number 11-344
Appendix C: Interview Guide

E-Mail #1

- What factors motivated you to enroll in asynchronous online courses?
- What keeps you enrolled in your online courses?
- Have you ever considered dropping an asynchronous online course? Why? Why not?
- Have you ever dropped an asynchronous online course? Why? Why not?

E-Mail #2

- Before you were an online student, what expectations did you have about being an online student?
- Before you were an online student, what expectations did you have about online courses? (i.e. time commitment, class materials, level of ease/difficulty, etc.)
- Now that you have taken several online courses, has your experience as an online student met or not met your expectations. Tell me how your experience has met and/or not met your expectations.

E-Mail #3

- Describe your experience as an online student?
- How does being a woman impact/influence your experience as an online student?
- How do your multiple identities as spouse/partner, mother, sister, employee/employer, etc. impact/influence your experiences as an online student?
- How does your geographical location impact/influence your experiences as an online student?
- How do you describe your online experience to others (i.e. friends, family, co-workers, etc.) Is it different for different groups? If so, how?

E-Mail #4

- How has or how does your being an online student affect and/or impact you?
- How has or how does your being an online student affect and/or impact others (friends, family, co-workers, etc.)?
- What does your being an online student mean to you?
- What does your being an online student mean to others (friends, family, co-workers, etc.)?
- What changes in your life, in your perspectives, in your opinions, etc. do you attribute to your experience as an online student?

E-Mail #5

- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience as an online student?