

Spring 2017

## Being Retained: Perspective of the Online First-Year Composition Student

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### Recommended Citation

Mitchum, Catrina M.. "Being Retained: Perspective of the Online First-Year Composition Student" (2017).  
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Dissertation, English, Old Dominion University, DOI: 10.25777/r7t2-d724  
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BEING RETAINED: PERSPECTIVE OF THE ONLINE FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION  
STUDENT

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ENGLISH

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY  
May 2017

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## ABSTRACT

### BEING RETAINED: PERSPECTIVE OF THE ONLINE FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION STUDENT

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Keeping students in college classrooms can be a struggle, but keeping them in an online classroom is an even more difficult feat. While the field of retention research has expanded its focus beyond traditional four-year students to include a variety of non-traditional student situations, including online, it has yet to focus efforts on online first-year composition at the community college. The first-year of college has been shown to be the most critical in student retention at the institutional level, which puts first-year composition in a potentially influential position. The fact that fewer students are retained in online courses than face-to-face courses indicates that why students leave online first-year composition courses is an important question to ask.

In order to begin answering that question, this study investigates the relationships between student expectations and student success in online first-year composition courses. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire before the course started, give consent for the researcher to track progress in the course throughout the semester, and complete an interview when the student stopped participating, withdrew, or the semester ended. The data suggests that students perceive their expectations being met, even when they are not being met by the course, and that this perception might result increased student success. The data also suggests that students, overall, are expecting more quality peer communication than the courses provide and

that student attitude might impact success in the course. The findings suggest that those students who are unsuccessful may not have their expectations regarding communication, participation and online course preparation. Finally, the results indicate that having one or more risk factors for dropout did not predict student success in the course.

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For my daughters. Thank you for making me a more efficient researcher and writer.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is successfully completed because of the contributions and support of many people. First, I would like to thank the faculty and students who participated in this study; they made this research possible. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Rochelle Rodrigo, Dr. Julia Romberger, Dr. Joyce Neff and Dr. David Metzger, for their time, feedback, and support during this process. I would specifically like to thank Shelley for personalized cheerleading and sticking with the project when she didn't have to. Special thanks are due to my friend and colleague Chvonne Parker and my friend and brother-in-law David Brennan for last minute editing assistance. My friends and family, who have offered continued support and sounding boards, are due my many thanks as well. Finally, thank you to my children, who have never known what it's like to not have a mother working on a PhD, and to my partner, Andrew Clopton, for his love and support and for reading this monster.

## NOMENCLATURE

*Descriptive Coding:* In this study, descriptive coding is the act of summarizing responses using a word or short phrase.

*Institutional Perceptions:* In this study, they are how the institution views the student.

*InVivo Coding:* In this study, this coding uses words/phrases directly from participant responses as codes in conjunction with descriptive coding.

*Provisional Coding:* In this study, this is coding with previously generated codes specifically taken from the analysis done on questionnaire responses and applied to the interview responses.

*Retention:* In this study, retained students earned a *C* or higher and unretained students earned a *D* or lower.

*Sub-Coding:* In this study, this coding included a tag assigned after the primary code (for example, noting attitude and responsibility).

*Student Expectations:* In this study, they are what students are expecting to happen in the course before the course begins as reported in the questionnaire.

*Student Experiences:* In this study, they are how students are living the events of the course.

*Student Perspectives:* In this study, they are the students' reported experiences in the interview.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	x
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xiii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.1 Personal Connection to the Project .....	1
1.2 The Research Questions .....	5
1.3 Definitions .....	5
1.4 Chapter Descriptions .....	6
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	10
2.1 Overview .....	10
2.2 Student Retention Literature .....	10
2.3 Rhetoric/Composition Weighing in on Retention .....	33
2.4 Retention and Student Perspectives, Attitudes and Expectations .....	40
2.5 Filling the Gap.....	44
3. METHODOLOGY .....	46
3.1 Research Assumptions .....	46
3.2 Methodological Lens.....	47
3.3 Approaches and Approvals .....	50
3.4 Context and Participants.....	52
3.5 Data Collection Methods.....	57
3.6 Study Timeline .....	74
3.7 Data Management Methods.....	77
3.8 Analytic Methods, Adjustments, and Justifications .....	79
4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNICATION EXPECTATIONS AND SUCCESS.....	98
4.1 Summary of Results .....	98
4.2 Peer Communication .....	100
4.3 Instructor Communication.....	122
4.4 Communication Effort.....	131
4.5 Communication Discussion.....	134
5. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTICIPATION EXPECTATIONS AND SUCCESS.....	135

Chapter	Page
5.1 Summary of Results .....	135
5.2 Time Spent .....	136
5.3 Participation Frequency.....	148
5.4 Effort and Difficulty .....	163
5.5 Learning.....	173
5.6 Participation Expectations and Success Discussion.....	181
6. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONLINE COURSE EXPECTATIONS AND SUCCESS.....	183
6.1 Summary of Results .....	183
6.2 Why Online?.....	183
6.3 Online Versus Face-to-face .....	186
6.4 Online Knowledge and Preparation .....	204
6.5 Online Course Expectations and Success Discussion .....	212
7. INSTITUTIONAL PERCEPTIONS AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVES .....	214
7.1 Summary of Results .....	214
7.2 Institutional Perceptions of Students.....	214
7.3 Student Perspectives.....	228
7.4 The Unsuccessful Perspective .....	240
7.5 Institutional Perceptions and Student Perspectives Discussion .....	241
8. CONCLUSION.....	243
8.1 Summary .....	243
8.2 Communication Findings, Limitations, and the Future.....	243
8.3 Participation Findings, Limitations, and the Future .....	245
8.4 Impact of Online Findings, Limitations, and the Future .....	247
8.5 Perceptions and Perspectives Findings, Limitations, and the Future .....	249
8.6 Overall Findings, Limitations, and the Future .....	250
REFERENCES .....	252
APPENDICES .....	272
Appendix A .....	272
Appendix B.....	293
Appendix C.....	313
Appendix D .....	315
Appendix E.....	317
Appendix F .....	323
Appendix G .....	328
VITA.....	329

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1.1 Study Definitions.....	6
3.1. Instruments and Data Collected .....	58
3.2. Data Collection Timeline .....	75
4.1. Required Response Frequency .....	106
4.2. Outliers: Meeting Peer Communication Frequency Expectations with the Average Course Required Response Frequency.....	114
4.3. Outliers: Passing students who completed less than 75% of required classmate responses .....	115
4.4. Meeting Reported Peer Communication Expectations and Success .....	118
4.5. Outliers: Peer Communication Frequency Expectations, Requirements, Reports, and Completes .....	120
4.6. Outliers: Completed <75% of the Required Responses .....	121
4.7. Differences between Expected and Reported Instructor Communication Compared to Success .....	129
4.8. Outliers: Unsuccessful Students' Expected and Reported Instructor Communication Frequency .....	130
4.9. Outliers: Expected Instructor Communication Frequency .....	131
4.10. Difference between Expected and Reported Communication Effort Compared to Success .....	133
5.1. Difference between Time Expected and Time Logged and Coordinating Success .....	142
5.2. Difference between Expectations and Reported Time Spent and Coordinating Success .....	146
5.3. Outliers: Unsuccessful Student Time Spent Per Week .....	147

Table	Page
5.4. Participation Frequency Expectations and Logins and Coordinating Success .....	155
5.5. Required Graded Assignments by Course .....	156
5.6. Graded Assignments Meeting Expectations and Coordinating Success .....	157
5.7. Outliers: Unsuccessful Expectations, Logins, Requirements and Submissions.....	160
5.8. Outliers: Submitted Assignments.....	161
5.9. Difficulty Definitions .....	166
5.10. Responsibility for Difficulty .....	168
5.11. Difficulty Expected and Reported and Coordinating Success .....	171
5.12. Outliers: Expected Difficulty and Effort and Reported Difficulty.....	172
5.13. Expected Learning Outcomes .....	174
5.14. Meeting Learning Expectations .....	177
5.15. Meeting Learning Expectations and Coordinating Success .....	179
5.16. Outliers: Learning Expectations.....	180
6.1. Reasons for Taking Online.....	184
6.2. Reasons for Taking the Course Online and Coordinating Success .....	185
6.3. “Yes” Reasons for Differences between Online and Face-to-Face Courses.....	189
6.4. Attitudes toward Differences between Online and Face-to-Face.....	191
6.5. “No” Reasons for No Differences between Online and Face-to-Face Courses .....	192
6.6. Similarities/Differences Between Online and Face-to-Face .....	194
6.7. Attitude Toward Online Courses in Interview .....	196
6.8. Met Expectations of Online Courses and Coordinating Success .....	201
6.9. Shift in Attitude and Coordinating Success .....	202

Table	Page
6.10. Source of Knowledge for Online Courses .....	206
6.11. Preparation for and Management of Online Challenges .....	208
6.12. Preparation for Online Challenges and Coordinating Success.....	211
7.1. Sources of Information on Student Services .....	218
7.2. Outliers: Unsuccessful Student Risk Factors .....	227
7.3. Student Perspective of Meeting Expectations .....	229
7.4. Met Expectation and Coordinating Success.....	231
7.5. Life Events and their Impact on Performance.....	232
7.6. General Factors Contributing to Performance .....	234
7.7. Internal Course Factors Impacting Performance.....	236
7.8. Frustrations Encountered.....	237
7.9. Outliers: Factors Impacting Performance .....	239
7.10. The Unsuccessful Perspective .....	240

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
4.1. How often do you expect to communicate with peers? .....	100
4.2. Peer Communication Frequency by Course Length .....	102
4.3. Number of Weeks Requiring Classmate Responses .....	104
4.4. Average Number of Required Responses .....	105
4.5. Difference in Peer Communication Frequency .....	107
4.6. ENG111 Percentage of Completed Responses .....	109
4.7. ENG112 Percentage of Completed Required Responses by Course Length .....	110
4.8. Percentage of Completed Required Responses Across All Courses and Lengths .....	112
4.9. Reported Peer Communication Frequency .....	116
4.10. Expected and Reported Peer Communication Frequencies Interviewees Only .....	117
4.11. How often do you expect to communicate with the instructor? .....	123
4.12. Instructor Communication Frequency by Course Length .....	125
4.13. Reported Instructor Communication Frequency .....	127
4.14. Expected and Reported Instructor Communication Frequency .....	128
4.15. How much effort do you expect to put into communication? .....	132
5.1. How much time do you expect to spend on coursework? .....	137
5.2. Expected Hours per Week by Course Length .....	139
5.3. Time Logged Per Week in Blackboard .....	140
5.4. Expected and Logged Time Spent .....	141
5.5. Reported Time Spent on Coursework .....	144

Figure	Page
5.6. Expected and Reported Time Spent .....	145
5.7. How often do you expect to participate in the course? .....	149
5.8. Participation Frequency by Course Length .....	151
5.9. Average Logins Per Week.....	153
5.10. Expected and Logged Participation Frequency.....	154
5.11. Percentage of Assignments On Time, Late or Not Submitted .....	159
5.12. How much effort do you expect to put into your coursework? .....	163
5.13. How difficult or easy do you expect the course to be? .....	164
5.14. Reported Course Difficulty .....	169
5.15. Expected and Reported Course Difficulty .....	170
6.1. Do you expect the online course to be different from the face-to-face course?.....	187
6.2. Student Attitude toward Online Courses Questionnaire and Interview Results .....	199
6.3. Codes Generated for Online vs. Face-to-Face .....	200
6.4. How knowledgeable are you about online courses? .....	205
6.5. Prior Course Knowledge and Success.....	210
7.1. How much Financial Aid did you receive this semester? .....	215
7.2. Which student services are you aware of? .....	217
7.3. How much support do you receive from family and friends?.....	219
7.4. What was your HS GPA?.....	221
7.5. What is your current GPA? .....	222
7.6. Highest Level of Education for Mother and Father .....	223
7.7. What year did you graduate high school or receive your GED?.....	224

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **1.1 Personal Connection to the Project**

In the spring of 2009, I taught my first online section of first-year composition with the community college where I had been teaching face-to-face courses. Within the first five to eight weeks, I noticed that more of my online students withdrew or stopped participating than my face-to-face students. This issue has interested me since that very first semester and it is something I have worked toward “fixing” in my own classes. The online courses I design require meaningful participation from both the student and myself. I reach out to students who suddenly stop submitting work, and I feel I may be more involved in my online students’ lives than those I teach face-to-face. However, high online course withdrawal is not a phenomenon particular to my own classes. Studies have found and institutions have reported that more students drop out of online classes than face-to-face classes in general (Dietz-Uhler, Fisher, & Han, 2007; Jenkins, 2012; Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner, & Ison, 2003; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Parker, 1999; Parry, 2010).

This interest in why students take, and are less successful in, online courses became more focused during a Spring 2013 required doctoral course. Two Fall 2012 events sparked the research process: (a) a student in my College Composition II online course indicated that she took the class online because she felt she did not get her money’s worth out of the face-to-face class, and (b) a discussion in the WPA\_Listserv expressed an overall sense that online courses are “less than” face-to-face classes. This attitude could be because many faculty members are skeptical of online courses (Shieh, 2009; Straumsheim, 2014). The combination of these two opposing viewpoints made me wonder if the reasons students took the classes online and the



expectations going in had something to do with their success in the course.

The study that resulted from the course I took was under a 16-week time constraint, but did align with the research on reasons students give for taking courses online. I started off the project by asking students the reasons they take composition classes online. Because of the constraints of the course, instead of administering the questionnaire before the class started and then at the midway point, which would have been ideal, it was necessary to administer the questionnaire to students just after the midterm. Although only three responses were received, the student responses did corroborate previous research on student attitudes toward and expectations of online classes in general with the addition of student perceptions of the instructor. Because the study was conducted so late in the semester, only the students still attending participated and those students were expecting an *A* in the course.

Understanding the expectations and experiences of students that perform well is important, but understanding the expectations and experiences of the students who do not perform well and whether or not this disconnect contributes to poor performance is understudied. Studying student success goes hand in hand with studying retention as students who are retained are deemed “successful” and those who are not retained are deemed “unsuccessful.” Retention studies tend toward focusing on predicting whether or not students will be successful (in class or in the institution). The research discusses these students based on instructor or institution experiences with them or data that is meant to represent them (demographics, GPA, SAT scores, financial aid receipt, etc.), or studies talk about retention as something that is dependent on the instructor, the institution or the student’s motivation. While all of these have been shown to be factors in student retention, student expectations might be another piece to the puzzle (and one we can do something about). The student perspective on leaving and the impact of expectations

on that decision would be a useful addition to both retention literature and to the field of composition/rhetoric since the student perspective on the topic of retention is so often lacking in the research.

While my interest was initially driven by personal experience, this problem is rampant in higher education. Publications like *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education* have a vast collection of articles, blogs, research, and letters to the editor that focus on student retention. The areas of focus are how to increase or improve retention and whether or not it can be done (Hoover, 2007a; Hoover, 2015; Jenkins, 2012; Pang, 2010; Parry, 2010; Straumsheim, 2013), factors contributing to student retention (Brownstein, 2000; Bartlett, 2002; Hoover, 2015; Glenn, 2010; Reed, 2015; Mintz, 2014; Sternberg, 2013), and why retention matters and to whom it should matter (Fain, 2012; Hoover, 2007a; Hoover, 2007b).

Student retention in general is a topic too large to cover in a single book or series of books, but narrowing retention down specifically to online courses is important because studies have suggested that online courses have a lower retention rate than their face-to-face counterparts (Dietz-Uhler, et al., 2007; Jenkins, 2012; Moore, et al., 2003; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Parker, 1999; Parry, 2010). Studies in retention in online courses add additional layers of complexity to general retention issues because the course design is different, instructors interact with students in different ways, and online students may have home situations different from those who take face-to-face classes. It is often the differences in student preparation and experience that can cause differences in student performance when comparing online to face-to-face courses (Hannay & Newvine, 2006; Wilson & Allen, 2011; Ya Ni, 2013). Online classes are sometimes considered the alternative while face-to-face is the default or preferred method of taking college courses. Determining why students are enrolling, what they are expecting, and

why they are leaving these classes might be contributing factors to increasing the number who stay.

Studying online courses is also an area of research that is very large, but narrowing the study down further to retention in online first-year composition courses not only fills a gap in composition and rhetoric scholarship, but also contributes to the larger area of retention studies. First-year composition is often seen as a gatekeeping course (Bergin, 2012; Rodgers Comfort, Fitts, Lalicker, Teutsch, & Tischio, 2003; Sonnenmoser, 2009) because every student has to take this class or series of classes in order to graduate. The first year of college has also been identified as a critical year in retention in the college overall because most students that drop out do so during the first year or between the first and second year (Brownstein, 2000; Crissman, 2001; Griffith, 1995; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Nichols, 2010). This connection places first-year composition in a potentially influential position in students' lives.

Studying retention in online first-year composition contributes to the field in three ways. First, it makes the administration happy. The administration often focuses on how to retain students and how to help more students pass, so trying to get to the bottom of why these students are not taking the necessary steps to pass a course may help to bring administrative support. Second, the majority of the research that focuses on distance education in composition focuses on things like design ("how to" and usability) and how similar they are to face-to-face classes. Lastly, the retention research and student attitude/expectations research do not overlap with composition beyond a few studies. This project adds to the scholarship by addressing some general distance education issues more specifically within composition with the hope that English departments may find something useful that will entice them to work together with advisors and student affairs to help these students be successful.

## 1.2 The Research Questions

My first research question is my primary question and is followed by one that attempts to tease out some of the nuances concerning the students' reasons for taking first-year composition online:

- Why do students leave our first-year online first-year composition classes at a higher rate than face-to-face first-year composition classes?
- Is there a relationship between student expectations about the online version of the course or college and their retention in said course?

My hope was that these questions would result in answers to help administration, faculty, and student services work together to improve students' chances of success.

I studied the retention of first-year composition students in online courses using questionnaires, progress reports, and interviews. I hoped to find out why the students that withdrew or stopped participating left and determine if leaving was partially due to their expectations differing from their experiences because I wanted to understand why the dropout rate is higher in the online version of these courses than the face-to-face version. This issue matters because the first year of college is critical to students' overall success in college (Bartlett, 2002; Brownstein, 2002; Tinto, 2003), which puts first-year composition in an interesting position to have an impact on student success.

## 1.3 Definitions

Table 1.1 contains definitions of words used frequently in this study. These definitions can also be found in the Nomenclature on page xiv. In the table, they are organized by their approximate appearance in the text; in the Nomenclature, they are listed alphabetically.

Table 1.1

<i>Study Definitions</i>	
Word	Definition
Student Expectations	What students are expecting to happen in the course before the course begins as reported in the questionnaire.
Student Perspectives	Students reported experiences in the interview.
Student Experiences	How students are living the events of the course.
Institutional Perceptions	How the institution views the student.
Retention	Retained= <i>C</i> or higher; Unretained= <i>D</i> or lower.
InVivo Coding	Uses words/phrases directly from participant responses as codes.
Descriptive Coding	Summarizes responses using a word or short phrase.
Sub-Coding	Tag assigned after the primary code (for example, noting attitude and responsibility)
Provisional Coding	Coding with previously generated codes.

### 1.4 Chapter Descriptions

Chapter 1: The introduction began by explaining my personal interest in the project and how I came to the exact research questions that I am asking. It then connected the personal experience to the problem using the scholarship on retention in general and retention in online courses. Finally, it connected the problem back to writing studies by briefly examining the composition/rhetoric scholarship in regard to students leaving. This introductory chapter then provided the research questions and statement of the problem.

Chapter 2: This chapter reviews literature from a few fields in order to establish the need for this study. The literature review begins with a brief examination of the history of retention studies in general by focusing on the three main theorists (Vincent Tinto, John Bean, and

Alexander Astin) that influence retention efforts today. The focus then shifts to the differences of definition focusing primarily on definitions of success in regard to retention and persistence in order to discuss the nuances of retention studies so that the weaknesses and disconnects would be clearly established. The discussion then narrows to the scholarship of retention in community colleges, as the location of the study is a community college, and then to retention in online courses. Next, the review of literature examines the study of retention in the field of rhetoric/composition. This discussion is followed by a brief examination of expectations and retention. The review then ties the threads together to explain why the study of unsuccessful student perspectives in online first-year composition courses is necessary.

Chapter 3: The third chapter provides a detailed methodology. This methodology begins by establishing the philosophical perspective that is influencing the project and supporting my methodology itself by explaining reflexive methodologies as discussed by Patricia Sullivan and Porter (1997). This chapter then provides background details on the context of the study. Next, the methodology identifies who the participants were and what instruments were used to collect data and why these instruments were chosen. The questionnaire, progress report, and interview prompts are all outlined, supported in detail, and followed by a discussion of why these decisions were made and the ethical dilemmas inherent in this project. The next section of this chapter discusses how the data was collected, managed, and analyzed. The analysis section provides the detailed steps taken and rationale for each step.

Chapter 4: The fourth chapter contains the results and analysis of the data collected concerning communication. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section analyzes and discusses student expectations about peer communication frequency, whether or not those expectations were met, and any impact that met/unmet expectations may have on success. The

second section follows this same formula for instructor communication frequency data and the final section analyzes the amount of effort students expect to put into these communications and whether or not success could be predicted based on their expected effort. Each of these sections also discusses the outliers in the data and discusses the possible implications of the results. The chapter ends with a discussion of the findings of the analysis of the communication data.

Chapter 5: This chapter analyzes and discusses the data collected that focused on participation and coursework expectations. There are four sections in this chapter: Time, Participation Frequency, Effort and Difficulty, and Learning. Each section first establishes student expectations by analyzing, presenting, and discussing the questionnaire data related to that topic. Whether or not their expectations were met in each area is determined by data pulled from both Blackboard (via progress reports) and the interview responses. These met/unmet expectations are then compared to student success in the form of a final grade. Each section then discusses the outliers and the implications of the results. The chapter ends by reiterating the results of this chapter and pulling in the relevant results from Chapter 4 as well.

Chapter 6: This chapter analyzes and discusses the data related to the topic of online courses. There are three sections in this chapter. The first focuses on analyzing the questionnaire prompt that asked why students took the course online and then compares the responses to student success to determine if there was a connection. The second section analyzes and compares student perspectives on the differences and similarities between online and face-to-face courses to determine what students expected them to be and whether or not those expectations were met. Finally, the last section of the chapter presents and discusses the results of the questionnaire prompt that asked how knowledgeable students felt about online learning. Then, it analyzes and discusses the interview question that asks students how prepared they felt

for the challenges of online learning. Finally, knowledge and preparation are compared to each other, and preparation is compared to student success to determine if predictions can be made, and is followed by a discussion that pulls the sections together.

Chapter 7: This chapter focuses first on presenting the questionnaire prompts that asked students for demographic information typically used to label students “at risk” for dropout. Then, the data is analyzed in order to determine whether or not these risk factors can predict student success. The chapter then shifts to focus on the student perspective by analyzing whether or not students felt expectations were met and if that impacted their success. Then the factors that students felt impacted their success and the frustrations they encountered are analyzed and discussed. Finally, the chapter ends by analyzing the responses to the questions from the interview that only the unsuccessful students were asked and focuses on why these students were unsuccessful.

Chapter 8: The conclusion chapter is divided into five sections: Communication, Participation and Coursework, Online, Perceptions and Perspectives, and Overall. Each section presents the study findings for that topic and then discusses the limitations and possible directions for future research.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **2.1 Overview**

There are a few strands of scholarship that must inform a project on retention in online first-year composition (FYC) courses. This scholarship helps to justify the research questions “why are our students leaving these courses?” and “what do their expectations have to do with it?” First, it is useful to have an understanding of popular retention theories and models, as retention is a separate field of study. This field, just like any other, has different ways that it defines itself and divides itself. Understanding these definitions and divisions will help to break down some of the assumptions made about retention before exploring the retention scholarship most relevant to a study of online community college students.

Scholarship in retention in rhetoric/composition helps to show what our own field has discovered in regard to retention in the courses we teach. Unfortunately, there is no overlap between online retention and retention in writing studies courses. After establishing what the pertinent literature has done and where it is lacking, I make the important connection between the research questions and the literature supporting the focus of those questions. Therefore, research on student expectations and perspectives and their impact on student experiences needs to be established to show the possible connection between expectations and retention.

#### **2.2 Student Retention Literature**

##### **2.2.1 Brief Background of Popular Models and Theories**

Retention studies is a field of its own and therefore has a large body of scholarship on the topic of student retention. “Student retention,” very broadly, is the rate at which students are successful in college. How that success is defined is often dependent upon the scholars doing the

research, the institution, and accrediting agencies. This body of scholarship focuses on topics such as defining retention, improving retention, retention of online students, and retention at the community college level, to name a few (Astin, 1993; Campbell & Mislevy, 2012; Fike & Fike, 2008; Finnegan, Morris, & Lee, 2009; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Tinto, 1975).

While retention studies has a long history dating back to John McNeely in 1938 (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborki, 2011), retention efforts today rely very heavily on theories of retention from the 1970s and '80s that focus on the relationship between student and institution. Vincent Tinto, the most cited retention theorist, began publishing on retention in the 1970s arguing for solid definitions and theoretical frameworks that did not yet exist. His theory/model, the Student Integration Model, was based off Émile Durkheim's suicide theory that posited that suicide happens when an individual is not integrated into society. Tinto applied this theory to colleges based on the assumption that colleges and universities are a social system with their own values and social structures to create his model of student integration (1975; 1993). His model specifically focused on factors related to students integrating academically and socially into the institution's culture. This focus set the stage for further investigation into why students leave institutions, as it was unable to account for all contexts. The question is still being asked because education is changing and there is still no direct answer.

While the initial model is intended for traditional four-year institutions (Tinto, 1975), some studies show that Tinto's model could be applied to nontraditional education methods. Robert Sweet conducted a study in 1986 (the first application of retention studies in distance education) to adapt the Tinto model to adult distance students. He found that the model provides a useful framework as long as the variables involved in social and academic integration are

altered to reflect the nontraditional distance student. For example, in the study, telephone tutoring was considered a social integration measure. Some researchers have found that the model is applicable to nontraditional and minority students as well (Kraemer, 1993; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Sweet, 1986). For example, in 1993, Barbara Kraemer tested Academic and Social Integration from Tinto's model and their impact on retention for an older (over 25) Hispanic population at a community college. She found that participation in classroom discussion, presence of Hispanic faculty, staff, and students, and Hispanic cultural activities were accurate measures of academic and social integration. These studies show that Tinto's model could be applied to nontraditional education methods; however, not all studies of these populations have found that the four-year institution model is applicable. In fact, some studies (Barnes & Piland, 2010; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Fike & Fike, 2008; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Torres, et al., 2010) have found that the characteristics of nontraditional students have a more significant impact on retention.

A significant gap often cited in Tinto's model is not taking external factors, background characteristics, and how those variables impact student perceptions, commitment, and preferences into consideration (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, et al., 1992; Metzner & Bean, 1987). For example, Barbara Metzner and John Bean developed a model in the '80s, the Student Attrition Model, which was intended to understand and predict dropout rates for nontraditional students. They define nontraditional as older than 24, not living on campus, enrolled part-time, or some combination of these three factors (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Metzner & Bean, 1987). Their model implies that external environmental factors have a larger impact on dropout than academic factors for the nontraditional student (Bean & Metzner, 1985). They suggest that "if students cannot make adequate child care arrangements, or adjust their work schedules, or pay for

college, they will not continue in school regardless of good academic support” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 492). This model more directly speaks to this project because it addresses the target population of “typical” nontraditional students (two-year college students), but it does not address the nontraditional aspects of online courses.

One of the defining characteristics of nontraditional students is the lack of traditional forms of social integration, so socialization was not used in Bean and Metzner’s model; instead, they related past behavior to attitudes and intentions and then connected the results to future behavior (1985). In the version of this model that was tested in 1987, there are four sets of variables: academic performance, intent to leave, background, and environment. In this model, external environmental factors were an indicator as were internal (to the college) environmental factors. In testing this model, Metzner and Bean found that GPA (both college and high school) and commitment to the institution (including intent to leave and hours enrolled) were the most significant factors that impacted dropout (1987). Again, while this model comes closer to explaining retention for the population in my study it does not and cannot consider the online factor, nor does it take student perceptions of expectations and experiences into account.

A third commonly cited model is Alexander Astin’s (1993) Input-Environment-Output model. While this model does continue to hone in on students at four-year institutions, it has also provided scholars with a model that considers the characteristics of the student at the time they start college (input), the environment that the student is exposed to at the college (including peers, programs, faculty, etc.), and the results of the exposure to the college environment (output). However, like Tinto’s model, it primarily counts the college environment as the only environment impacting whether or not a student stays or goes, which is problematic when considering why online community college students leave.

While there are other models of retention proposed by theorists, such as William Spady and Alan Siedman, Tinto, Bean and Metzner, and Astin have been cited most frequently in current retention scholarship. Since their original publications, there have been changes to the models to include more categories of students, including minority students, online students, and graduate students, among others. However, regardless of who is being studied, these models try to describe the relationship between students and institutions and what impact that relationship has on student retention. This interaction is the basis for most retention scholarship and retention interventions today, as these models are still the most prevalent in testing variables, analyzing interventions, and predicting dropout risk. However, the context of the online FYC course at the community college does not fit nicely and neatly into these models. Nor do the students. The relationship is often studied from the perspective of the institution and its impact on the student, neglecting the student perspective and its impact on the experience. These two oversights make the research questions of why are they dropping out of these particular courses and how are their expectations and experiences contributing to retention necessary ones.

### **2.2.2 Definitions, Divisions, and Interventions**

Generally, retention scholarship can be divided into two broad categories: retention at the level of the institution (Crews, 2004; Fike & Fike, 2008; Polinsky, 2002/2003) and retention within individual courses (Dietz-Uhler, et al., 2007; Finnegan, et al., 2009; Griffith, 1995; Moore, et al., 2003). This division impacts how success, and therefore retention, is defined. Institutional retention discussions hone in on defining student success as graduating or transferring, also referred to as persistence (Boston, Ice, & Burgess, 2012; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Nichols, 2010; Tinto, 1975). These two definitions of success are based on what is best for two different groups: the institution and the students. It

could be argued that defining success as graduating from the first school in which the student enrolled specifically focuses on the benefit for the institution. It looks good, it improves *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, and it brings in money—more students enrolled equals more tuition and funding (Polinsky, 2002/2003; Powell, 2009; Powell, 2013; Tinto, 1975; Webb-Sunderhaus, 2010).

It could also be argued that defining persistence (continuing even if it is at another institution) as success focuses on the benefit to the student (Fike & Fike, 2008; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Tinto, 2003). For example, by investigating the persistence of students at two-year colleges over a three-year period, Ketevan Mamiseishvili and David Deggs, in a 2013 study, established the importance of defining success as still attending, having graduated from, or transferring to a four-year institution. The goal of the research was to determine what factors influence persistence and non-persistence in low-income students at the two-year college (TYC<sup>1</sup>), and they investigated four factors that influence persistence: student demographic characteristics, in-college attributes, personal goals, and environmental factors. Their findings indicate that though some factors (demographics) cannot be helped, the institutions can make changes in areas such as in-college attributes, which might include increased faculty, advisor, and peer interactions, and counseling programs for academic and personal planning (orientations, mentoring, etc.). Their goal, and the goal for many retention scholars, is to retain students in order to educate them because education is the key to upward mobility; however, institutions can often get caught up in how to keep students at their own institutions. Therefore, understanding why students leave a particular course can help refocus the attention on educating students instead of increasing enrollment.

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<sup>1</sup> TYC is used because, while many students take longer than two years to complete a degree, if going full time, it would take an average of two years to complete the required credits for most programs.

Persistence is also the definition of success for a newer concept of retention called “swirling.” Swirling can be defined as transferring from one school to the next with possible gaps in enrollment (stopping-out), or staying at the same institution with gaps in enrollment (Boston, et al., 2012; Campbell & Mislevy, 2012). It is argued by some that this model is a more accurate picture of the process that today’s student goes through in order to achieve a higher education (Boston, et al., 2012; Campbell & Mislevy, 2012). For example, Wallace Boston, Phil Ice, and Melissa Burgess, in a study of predictors of disenrollment variables in 2012, note that retention is fluid and changing and that “swirl theory” acknowledges that there is a complex relationship between enrollment and students’ diverse experiences. This theory is in opposition to the linear process that students are assumed to take through college and takes students’ goals and intentions into closer consideration (McCormick, 2003). While studying these patterns can lead to better understanding of students’ motivations to remain in and finish school, Alyse Hachey, Claire Wladis, and Katherine Conway (2013) acknowledge a risk to “swirling” through a higher education:

To the extent that students leave the university system before their sixth semester, the reasons could be both positive and negative. Swirling (moving in a laterally and perhaps haphazardly fashion in and out of post-secondary institutions), can negatively affect their persistence. (p. 29)

Being unsuccessful in a college course can contribute to swirling, and understanding why students are unsuccessful may help researchers and institutions better understand how to help students achieve their goals, even if the goal is to just take a class to see what it is like.

In narrowing down the focus of retention from institution-wide to course-specific, success is often defined as passing the course or finishing the course (Nichols, 2010). More often

than not, however, a student's success is defined by defining the unsuccessful students. The unsuccessful students are those who withdraw, stop participating in the course without withdrawing, or receive an *F* in the course (Nichols, 2010). The scholarship that focuses on retention in individual courses tends toward the study of why students have left primarily using preexisting data or questionnaire research that investigates variables for students who will be successful or are at risk for being unsuccessful (Finnegan, et al., 2009; Nichols, 2010). These variables might include actions that the students or the instructors have taken or not taken or elements of the course design (Dietz-Uhler, et al., 2007; Finnegan, et al., 2009; Griffith, 1995; Moore, et al., 2003).

Many times, the data for the identified indicators are not variables identified or selected by the students. For example, Catherine Finnegan, Libby Morris, and Kangjoo Lee, in their 2009 study of online discipline-specific courses, investigated the relationship between achievement and participation in the online courses using participation measures like the number of times a student posted to the discussion board. They identified students as completers and withdrawers (students who officially withdrew from the course). Completers were divided into two groups: successful completers (earned an *A*, *B*, or *C*) and unsuccessful completers (earned a *D* or *F*). They found a difference in participation behavior between the latter two groups. This type of focus on retention at the course level is primarily done to determine what causes the difference between being successful and unsuccessful in order to predict which category a student will fall into. However, labeling students based on predetermined factors may not be the answer.

This is partially because, in order to make these predictions about success, retention scholarship tends to focus on the student characteristics that may predict whether or not a student will be successful at an institution. These studies look at large sets of data and complete



quantitative analysis to make these predictions (Boston, et al., 2012; Fike & Fike, 2008; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Parker, 1999). For example, in a 2012 study by Wallace Boston, Phil Ice, and Melissa Burgess, they took data from students' applications, enrollment, and academic achievement data warehouse and calculated the descriptive statistics before performing a multiple regression analysis. They provided the six predictors of disenrollment found in a study they previously conducted: no transfer credit received, total number of courses previously taken, last grade received was an *F*, last grade received was a *W*, student GPA of 3.01–3.99, and student GPA of 2.01–3.00.

Pulling from existing data to make predictions about factors that might label students at risk for dropout is a methodological trend in the scholarship. While it can be useful to have an idea of who is “at risk,” we also run the risk of pigeonholing students based on certain factors that they may not be able to control. Not only does this labeling not take the context of the course or the school into consideration, it also does not take the students as evolving and thinking learners into consideration.

Despite this trend in the literature, not all studies pull variables from existing data. There are studies that collect data about variables that impact student success directly from the student (Friedman & Mandel, 2011; Nichols, 2010). While self-reporting is considered problematic by some because students may not be truthful in their responses (Kuncel, Crede & Thomas, 2005), obtaining the student perspective is a valuable addition to the many studies that already focus on analyzing large sets of data about students. It can allow us to begin seeing a more complete picture of retention. For example, a 2011 study of the impact of student motivation on retention, Barry Friedman and Rhonda Mandel tried to determine if a needs questionnaire that measured for achievement, affiliation, autonomy, and dominance could predict academic performance and

retention. They included additional demographic variables (race, gender, parental education level, high school GPA, and SAT scores) that have been shown to be related to retention as control variables. They determined that those with higher achievement needs (which are students who need to have results) that are not motivated to work alone are more likely to have higher grades, but are not more likely to reenroll sophomore year. While this study does measure motivation by asking the student directly, the focus is still on predictor variables that are often deemed unchangeable by the institution. There is value in offering predictions for who might be at risk, but, again, it does not take context or the student into consideration. Predictions can be helpful in identifying which incoming students need help adjusting to college and placing labels on students, but it might be more effective to tap into students' experiences to change the institution instead of trying to change the student.

### **2.2.3 Retention and the Nontraditional Student**

Two specific niches of research in retention studies that are relevant to this study are scholarship in retention at the community college and retention in online courses. Retention at the community college falls in line with institutional definitions of retention, but the students at the community college historically have different intentions, goals, life experiences/situations, and preferences than the students attending four-year institutions. Retention in online courses is another area that aligns specifically with course-level definitions of retention, but does not quite fit into any of the models discussed earlier.

**2.2.3.1 Retention at the Community College.** The open-enrollment policy and affordability of the community college makes it the only road to higher education for many academically underprepared or financially unstable individuals with college aspirations. This same policy, however, also means that community colleges have a higher percentage of students

with risk factors for dropping out than most four-year institutions (Hagedorn, 2011). The students enrolling in community college courses often have more responsibilities outside of college and may be less academically prepared than those attending a four-year institution. These characteristics have been indicated as risk factors for dropout by several studies (Barnes & Piland, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Torres, et al., 2010). These differences make a study specific to the community college an important endeavor.

Retention scholarship focusing on community colleges, therefore, has tried to determine what predictors are applicable to this population based on the students' differences in background and other characteristics commonly dissimilar between two-year and four-year college students. For example, in their 2008 study on community college retention, David Fike and Renea Fike identify variables specific to community college students and test for a relationship between the variables and retention. The purpose of this study was to specifically identify variables that were specific to the community college student population and statistically test for their relationship to retention. These variables included age, ethnicity, enrollment in developmental courses, number of hours enrolled, parental education, financial aid, and online courses taken. They performed a quantitative analysis to determine if any of the variables were predictors of success or "risk," and used those variables that were strong predictors to suggest possible interventions for those at risk. They found that taking both developmental reading and developmental math were predictors of success as were taking online courses, receiving financial aid, and a lower number of semester hours taken. While honing in on variables that are relevant to this population allows the researchers to develop interventions, this method assumes that certain life situations or choices have created a defect in the student's ability to complete a

course. Again, asking the student what might have helped or how their expectations played into the experience may provide deeper insight.

Notably, some scholarship has indicated that external environmental factors have the largest impact on student success at the community college. For example, in a 2010 study of the effects of working on retention of students at a TYC by Vasti Torres, Jacobon Gross, and Afet Dadashova, it was found that there was a negative relationship between the number of hours worked and academic success; the more hours a student worked, the less successful they were in school (success being defined by GPA). They indicate not finding a relationship between hours worked and enrollment the following semester, but did find a relationship between GPA and enrollment the following semester. They also found that students who worked more than 30 hours a week were enrolling in fewer credit hours (in addition to having a lower GPA). While it is easy to assume that this is the case for older students, this study was in fact done on traditional-age students (defined in that study as students under 21). Considering external life events is important to my study as well because of the population being investigated.

Being a student at a community college already tends to complicate the process of student dropout by adding variables that traditional four-year students typically do not have; being a community college student taking online classes adds yet another layer of complexity. Scholars have identified that “. . .one reason why online courses have higher dropout rates is that they enroll a greater proportion of students who are at greater risk for dropout” (Pontes, et al., 2010). Online students, whether at a community college or a traditional four-year institution, must also contend with the challenges that online education brings. The challenges that can specifically impact retention often include feelings of isolation (Nash, 2005; Rovai, 2003); changes in instructor and student roles in the classroom (Arbaugh, 2004; Rovai, 2003); technology-related

skills and issues such as communication, clarity, and knowledge of systems and platforms (Arbaugh, 2004; Herbert, 2006; Rovai, 2003); and time management (Moore, et al., 2003; Rovai, 2003), to name a few.

**2.2.3.2 Retention in Online Courses.** It is important to remember that retention is a complex process whether it is online or in a face-to-face classroom. For example, GPA has often been shown to be a reliable predictor of dropout. Alyse Hachey, Claire Wladis, and Katherine Conway, in 2013 study, examined the effects of a new policy at their community college that did not allow students with a GPA under a 2.0 to enroll in online courses. They found that rather than students at the lower end of the GPA scale, it was those in the middle (2.0–3.5) who were more likely to not be retained. This study indicates that GPA is not the only factor and should not be used to bar students from enrolling in online courses.

The study of retention in online courses tends to focus on the course level because there are not many accredited degree programs that are entirely online. Part of the reason for the study of these courses is that students in online courses have a lower rate of success (as in, remaining in and passing the course) than students in face-to-face courses (Dietz-Uhler, et al., 2007; Moore, et al., 2003; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Parker, 1999). Just like dropout in general, it is difficult to pinpoint why this is happening (Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013). However, as educators and scholars, exploring the reasons for this particular relationship between online courses and retention is paramount to making positive changes in these success rates.

Additionally, despite the amount of research on retention in general and the growing body of research on retention online, “most student retention models have been designed for the face-to-face classroom learning environment, making it very difficult to apply them to the online learning environment” (Gayton, 2013, p. 147). For example, a program run by Kevin Griffith

(1995) that was intended to help students cope with common risk factors in leaving college focuses on issues (loneliness and alienation) that are more common to traditional students attending four-year colleges. These students are living on campus and have to make an effort to make friends and be involved in the culture of the college in order to have any social support. While online community college students may feel disconnected and isolated from their instructor and peers, most continue to have outside relationships that the traditional four-year students might be lacking such as more immediate support from family, work, and well-established friendships. On the other hand, too many relationship responsibilities can cause conflict with completing course work. In fact, “Online learners may have the most tenuous affinity with the learning institution, and may have placed external responsibilities ahead of educational goals, thus making an online environment the only viable option for continuing their education” (Hachey, et al., 2013, p. 13). This preference does not mean, however, that feelings of isolation and not “mattering” are not important concepts in online education. What it does mean is that these concepts play out differently when computers are introduced into the equation.

Traditional models of retention focus on the relationship between student and institution and how integration into the institution might affect the student’s decision to stay. The problem with applying the models of retention proposed by Tinto, Bean and Metzner, and Astin is that . . . existing models of persistence, retention and/or integration may not be applicable to the online learning environment because of an emphasis on social integration, a process which is very different for the online education student in comparison to the traditional residential or commuter students. (Nash, 2005, p. 13)

These models focus mostly on forces internal to the college or external to the student (both important models), but they neglect to include evaluation of the changes that occur when you take a face-to-face class and put it online.

Feeling like they matter and belong to the college community is an important factor in college student retention (Rayle & Chung, 2007; Schlossberg, 1989), and one way to achieve social integration is through relationships. This idea of being an important part of the college environment is linked to the social integration objective that many models of retention are based on. Classroom relationships and interactions (student-instructor and student-student) are important, but they happen differently online than they do face-to-face. For example, Robert Nash's 2005 study on why distance-learning students at a community college in California dropped or failed their courses found that while Tinto's model might be useful (and is corroborated by other research), it is difficult to translate to the online environment because interactions in online settings are different than face-to-face settings. Scholarship on communication online supports this idea that communication and relationship building happen differently online, and this difference is partially because identity formation happens through a mediated space (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Turkle, 1997; Walther, 1992; Walther, 1995).

Anonymity is often cited as a leading variable in drastic changes to identity online because online communication lacks many social cues like body language and tone of voice (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Lee, 2007; Turkle, 1997). Online courses don't allow for any more anonymity than a face-to-face class and come with more fluid pre-established relationship expectations (instructors often play a more dominant role in face-to-face classes). Another reason for this difference between communication in online and face-to-face courses is that the medium used to communicate a specific message affects the message and how it is received (McLuhan,

1994). This idea translates to the online classroom because “the decision to teach (really communicate) in a distance learning environment requires a change in expectations about how communication between student and teacher will occur” (Allen, et al., 2004, p. 405).

Understanding these expectations might be an important factor in student success.

*2.2.3.2.1 What We Know About Online Education.* Some of the online retention scholarship that exists focuses on trying to determine the differences between the on-campus and online student populations and experiences in order to discover why more students are dropping out of online courses (Arbaugh, 2010; Moore, et al., 2003; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Pontes, et al, 2010). Some of the key differences that have been found between online and face-to-face courses include the delivery of the course as it has been shown that course design has an impact on how a course is experienced (Arbaugh, 2010; DePew & Lettner-Rust, 2009; Grady & Davis, 2005; Miller-Cochran & Rodrigo, 2006; Warnock, 2009), as well as how relationships and support are provided across the internet (Arbaugh, 2010; Coppola, 2005; Grady & Davis, 2005; Kastman Breuch, 2005; Komarraju, et al., 2010; Nash, 2005). Exploring the nuances of these two aspects of online education is important because they show the impact that online classes may have on student experiences and therefore on student success.

*2.2.3.2.2 Delivery.* The importance of the impact of the design of a course on how students experience the course has been supported by scholarship in online education coming from the field of composition (DePew & Lettner-Rust, 2009; Miller-Cochran & Rodrigo, 2006; Neff & Whithaus, 2008; Warnock, 2009). Some of the studies on design and tools look at user-centered versus system-centered designs (Blythe, 2001), and using blogs (Tyron, 2006) or podcasting (Bowie, 2012) in the design, just to name a few. Additionally, Scott Warnock’s 2009 book *Teaching Writing Online: How & Why* explains to the reader how to design an entire



writing course online, and Joyce Magnotto Neff and Carl Whithaus's 2008 book *Writing Across Distances and Disciplines* suggests using WAC and WID as models for distance education in the composition field. Not only does the literature cover design and an array of tools and how to use them, but it also covers the usability of those tools (Miller-Cochran & Rodrigo, 2006).

Some retention studies have exclusively looked at the impact of online course design on student retention. For example, in the 2007 study by Beth Dietz-Uhler, Amy Fisher and Andrea Han, the researchers used the Quality Matters Rubric (a rubric designed to grade online courses based on best practices) to evaluate online course design. They explain how the online courses investigated met the requirements of the rubric and determine that design impacts retention because two well-designed courses had a retention rate of 95%. The researchers acknowledge that more research needs to be done, but they suggest that investigating design as a variable in student success is important. My study investigates student experiences in courses that have been reviewed using this same rubric. This application means that the courses should have a high retention rate, but this is not the case.

Some of the retention scholarship that focuses on several different variables impacting student success has also found that course design elements can have an impact on student satisfaction and dropout. For example, in a 2003 study by Kathleen Moore, Jeffrey Barkovich, Marie Fetzner and Sherrell Ison on the "at risk" variables for online students they indicate that "the survey findings suggest that issues such as 'course structure,' 'clear directions on how to get started,' and 'instructor teaching style' are directly related to non-retention of students" (Moore, et al., 2003, p. 114). A common criticism of online courses is the inability to get immediate answers from instructors, despite being able to email 24/7, and this communication problem becomes a bigger issue when the design of the course creates confusion (Morris &

Finnegan, 2009). Course design and instructor responsiveness may be so closely related because students can sometimes have difficulty separating the course from the instructor. The delivery of the course can impact the student's experiences and possibly his/her success, but this impact calls into question how expectations of the online format contribute to those experiences as well.

*2.2.3.2.3 Relationships and Support in Online Courses.* A large amount of literature about online courses that comes from rhetoric and composition focuses on theories of identity, community building and power. Identity has been studied because online courses alter the creation of a persona in the classroom (Miller, 2006). Creating a community is often studied both in theory and as a "how-to," as composition classes tend to lend themselves to peer interaction (Hunter, 2011). Issues of power involve the digital divide as well as who technology interfaces are designed for and the power dynamics of an online classroom (DePew & Letterner-Rust, 2006; Hunter, 2011). Issues of the power of technology are evident in the retention literature as well (Anson, 1999; Brabazon, 2009). What's important for this study is that how identity (both student and instructor) is formed, community is created and power is balanced in online courses are all altered because of the online platform, and these issues are three that impact relationships in online courses.

Many studies of retention have established that the relationships and support students have from academic sources, family, and friends are key to retention (Boston, et al., 2009; Grillo & Leist, 2013; Herbert, 2006; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Nichols, 2010; Roberts & Styron, 2006). However, how these relationships and support happen becomes a bit trickier when you add in the element of computer-mediated communication, as is necessary in an online course (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Shedletsky & Aitkin, 2003; Turkle, 1997). Scholarship that focuses on community building and faculty-student interactions in distance education have also indicated

that while community is important in both face-to-face and online classes, the how of building community is different online (Arbuagh, 2010; Bernard et al, 2009; Coppola, 2005; Grady & Davis, 2005; Kastman Breuch, 2005; Komarraju, et al., 2010). This difference is partially because many online courses are asynchronous and

. . . a common criticism of distance learning is the lack of personal contact and immediate instructor feedback that some students prefer. One of the most frequently stated reasons for dropout is the sense of isolation experienced by students studying off campus. (Nash, 2005, Methods to Improve Course Completion section, para. 2)

The way that faculty interact with the course and the students can play a role in whether or not students feel they are isolated. However, some students may prefer a hands-off approach and this approach is why they are taking an online class. Therefore, the present study considers whether there is a connection between student expectations of communication frequency and how often students actually communicated the instructor and peers.

Some retention studies that particularly look at relationships and support in online courses have found that student activity (Finnegan, et al., 2009; Gayton, 2013) and faculty activity can indeed be predictors of student success (Herbert, 2006; Morris & Finnegan, 2009). Some studies that have investigated variables that might impact withdraw have found that student perceptions of faculty involvement and interaction are the leading factors in a student's decision to stay or drop out of a course (Herbert, 2006; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Sweet, 1986).

For example, in one of the first studies of retention and distance education, Robert Sweet found:

Important additions to peer involvement in developing social integration are the frequency and quality of contacts students have with faculty members. The extent to

which students acquire a sense of social involvement and achievement determines their respective commitments to the institution attended and to the goal of college graduation.

(1986, p. 202)

This impact is why it is important for students to have realistic expectations of contact with instructors. While the distance education of the 1980s was not primarily hosted on the Internet, not being able to physically go to a teacher either during office hours or before or after class is often seen as a downfall of distance education then and now. Therefore, it is important to establish the relationships that result from that contact in other ways.

The effect of these relationships can be seen in a study done by Michael Herbert in 2006, it was found that faculty responsiveness was the most important factor in taking an online class. This study used surveys that were sent to students enrolled in online courses. These surveys had students rate certain properties of online courses such as faculty responsiveness to student needs, quality of online instruction, faculty feedback to students in a timely manner, institutional response to questions in a timely manner, the frequency of student and instructor interaction, the availability of adequate financial aid, and the importance of student-to-student collaborations. Other studies, such as Libby Morris and Catherine Finnegan's 2005 study comparing completers and withdrawers on their reasons for leaving, have found that the completers felt they were part of the course community and withdrawers resented logging in to participate.

In another study, conducted in 2010, J. B. Arbaugh investigated the impact of instructor activity in an online class on student satisfaction with the online medium for courses taken to earn an MBA. The focus of the study was on formal and informal teaching roles. The formal role was defined as teaching presence (which is indicated as the design, facilitation and direction of the processes in the course) and the informal role was indicated to be immediacy behaviors

(defined as behaviors that reduce social and psychological distance between people). The study collected data from students via surveys and found that both teaching roles were significant predictors of student satisfaction. Student satisfaction has been linked to retention in that the more satisfied a student is, the more likely that student will return to the same institution the following year (Schreiner & Nelson, 2013). While the types of activities investigated in these studies of academic support, student-faculty interaction and student satisfaction might fall under “social integration” as they are intended to help create a sense of community within the online course, they are accomplished in different ways online. This difference necessitates adding students’ expectations of these interactions and support in the online environment and comparing them to their actual experiences.

#### **2.2.4 Purpose of Retention Research: Interventions**

The purpose of all of this research on predictor variables and the process students go through when deciding to leave college is to prevent it. One of the leading ways that institutions try to prevent dropout is by providing interventions. Therefore, investigating interventions for retention are also central to retention scholarship (Garcia, 1991; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Grillo & Leist, 2013; Nichols, 2010; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003). These interventions often include improved tutoring services, additional advising, first-year seminar programs, and summer bridge programs. For example, in a 2013 study, Michael Grillo and Cathy Leist investigated the long-term use of student academic services at their institution. These academic support services were part of the institution’s centralized student support services and included scheduled tutoring, drop-in tutoring, learning assistance, and Supplemental Instruction. Their analysis suggests that there is an association between the quantity of time that students spend using these services and whether or not they graduate from college (those student spending more

time being more likely to graduate). In my study, the survey and follow up interview aimed to assess students' awareness of similar services in order to determine impact.

Some scholarship has focused specifically on the distance education retention interventions. For example, in his 2010 article, Mark Nichols analyzed four institutional interventions, which would be institutional environmental factors, at the center for distance learning at his own institution. These interventions included a student support questionnaire that measured readiness for distance learning, a "Study at Laidlaw College" (the institution in question) orientation, general messages of support sent to the students from academic support coordinators via email and personal contact from academic support coordinators via phone calls. Students deemed "unsuccessful" were surveyed and then self-selected for interviews. Time management, family reasons, too much work, life changes during the semester, and life got too busy were the top five reasons students gave for withdrawing from their course in the questionnaire. The study determined that the interventions were successful as the variables with the largest impact were not institutional variables. It was taken to mean that the institution could not have done more. The variables that were not institutional variables and had a large impact were used to formulate interview questions in my own study in order to corroborate some of these reasons.

Aside from academic services that are in addition to classroom time and distance education specific interventions, another trend in retention intervention is to offer some combination of first-year seminars and first-year composition courses since these courses are required at many institutions (Griffith, 1995; Crissman, 2001). In some instances, the same cohort takes the courses together. So, the same group of students is enrolled in the same sections of both classes. For example, Jennifer Crissman's 2001 study focused on comparing the retention

rates of two groups. The first was enrolled in a first-year seminar and the second was enrolled in both a first-year seminar and an English Composition course with the same group of students. Crissman used Astin's Input-Environment-Outcomes model establishing the precollege characteristics of gender, combined SAT scores, High School GPA, parental level of education and ethnicity, and it was believed that these characteristics would affect a student's experience in college. The "during college" variables in the model were place of residence, faculty contact outside classroom, involvement in academic life, involvement in social life, first-semester GPA and participation in a freshman seminar. The "outcomes" portion of this framework was GPA and returning for a second semester. Crissman found that students taking the clustered courses (the same group of students taking both first-year seminar and English Composition together) were not any more likely to be successful than the students taking the unclustered courses. This study suggests that a cohort approach in the first year does not necessarily mean students are being retained. While impossible to confirm, it may also suggest that social aspects of community are less important to retention than initially thought.

In other situations, the courses are actually combined and students use writing to explore the transition to college and clustering the first-year seminar with first-year composition is considered successful (Griffith, 1995). Specifically, the curriculum in Kevin Griffith's second semester first-year composition course focused on students reading and writing about loneliness and alienation (two topics that have been indicated in popular retention literature as issues for first-year students) and followed this focus with an investigation into campus cultures (again, following the idea put forth by Tinto that integration into the culture is key to retention). In this study, Griffith indicates that the students were having open discussions about the challenges they faced and how they overcame them. While the relationship between the course content and

retention can't be "proven," he indicates that only 5 of the 44 students that enrolled in the program did not return for sophomore year. While these two studies paint different pictures of the kind of impact that first-year composition and the first-year seminar can have together, looking at them together stresses the importance of defining retention. Crissman's study defined retention as enrolling in the second semester of the first year, while Griffith's study defined retention as enrolling in sophomore year. Additionally, the fact that the first-year has a significant impact on retention makes the courses taken in the first year important. This impact indicates that simply being a required first-year course puts first-year composition courses in a position to have an impact on student retention at the institutional level.

### **2.3 Rhetoric/Composition Weighing in on Retention**

First, retention scholarship itself inadvertently suggests that writing studies has a role to play in the investigation of retention because of the timing of the FYC course and the correlation between first year success and overall success. Additionally, while much of the retention scholarship does not hone in on specific disciplines, a 2009 study by Catherine Finnegan, Libby Morris, and Kangjoo Lee indicates that the discipline of a course matters and has its own impact on retention. The study was of archived participation data in online courses, and they found that the amount of participation in a course impacted retention within the course and there was a difference in participation behavior between academic disciplines. They found that students in English, communication and social science courses were participating in discussion and follow up posts two times more than students taking STEM courses, and students enrolled in STEM classes were viewing content pages more frequently than those in English, Communication and Social Sciences. This study suggests that it is important to study discipline specific courses because the amount of participation and discussion that students expect to do or that courses



require may vary by the subject. Additionally, it has been suggested that students need active and early involvement in the course from instructors and that instructors monitor student activity (Morris & Finnegan, 2009). Writing studies retention literature suggests that our field's pedagogy lends itself to active instructor involvement—the kind that aids in retaining students (Brunk-Chavez & Frederickson, 2008; Powell, 2013; Web-Sunderhaus, 2010).

One of the key findings in retention scholarship that ties retention directly to our work in Rhetoric/Composition is that the first year of college is critical in retention rates. Student experiences, from how well a student performs academically to how connected they feel to the campus in that first year, are significant factors in whether or not a student will be retained (graduate) or persist (transfer) (Feldman, 1993; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Parmar & Trotter, 2004). This ties retention directly to English studies because in most colleges and universities the English department “owns” the college composition course, which is one of the very few core courses required of all students, and it is often taken the first and second semesters of freshman year because it is often a prerequisite for higher-level courses. Overall, the timing of the FYC course and the potential level of instructor-student interaction places FYC in a significant role in retention.

There are also some political/economic issues that connect FYC retention to the retention of students in the institution as a whole. The first is the idea that FYC is a service course to the rest of the institution (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Griffith, 1995; Powell, 2009; Powell, 2013; Roemer, Schultz & Durst, 1999). While this label is one our field has fought against, the course is more often than not perceived in this way by the rest of the institution (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Roemer, et al., 1999). It is assumed that student success in FYC can lay the foundation for success in the institution at large partially because it is in the first year (Powell, 2013; Web-

Sunderhaus, 2010). English studies, therefore, sits in a unique position, as retention in our individual courses may impact institution retention. Another political consideration is that, though the first-year is critical in retention or persistence, many instructors in English departments don't see retention as their job. This problem harkens back to the discussion of the differences between an emphasis on what's best for the institution vs. what's best for the individual student. Sometimes, staying might not be in the student's best interest (Powell, 2013). However, it is unfair to the student to make the assumption that college is not right for a student who stops participating.

Unfortunately, in English studies, although we tend to care about our students' success, and we're in a position to make an impact, "retention" is often considered a dirty word because it is associated with administrative concerns that are directly related to monetary concerns (Hecl, 2008; Powell, 2009; Powell, 2013). Because of this attitude toward retention in English studies, there is very little scholarship coming directly from the field of rhetoric and composition that focuses on student retention in our own writing classes. Part of the problem with a lack of retention scholarship in composition and rhetoric is if we're not involved in the study of retention in our classes or the study of the impacts of composition on retention, then others may be making decisions for us about what we do in our classrooms (Powell, 2013). The scholarship that does exist comes mostly from thesis/dissertation efforts as well as the Council for Writing Program Administration (WPA). For example, the WPA lists "evaluating data on student retention" as one of the many job duties of a Writing Program Administrator in The Portland Resolution established in 1992. There have been a few other studies published in journals over the last two decades or so that focus primarily on retention and developmental writing. However, the most recent scholarship comes from a single author arguing that the reason students leave is

too complex a problem to try to predict or fight, and what should be done instead is focus on kairotic pedagogy (Powell, 2013).

A good portion of the scholarship on retention and writing comes from dissertations written in the 1980s and '90s, and so reflect the same types of methodologies as retention studies at large at the time. They focus on statistics and trying to use student characteristics to predict student success or trying to determine the usefulness of a particular course (Gandy, 1998; Marengo, 1999; Swift, 1986). For example in 1998 Barbara Taylor Gandy completed a dissertation that focused on the retention of students who took developmental English in a traditional lecture style face-to-face course versus those that took it in a computer-based course. In the computer-based course, while the instructor and students were in the same classroom, the students were at computer workstations and the instructor was at a monitor in the front of the classroom offering assistance via computer and face-to-face interaction. This study focused on variables like age, race, gender, and ACT scores to quantitatively try to predict whether or not certain variables would affect success when the course was administered face-to-face or computer-based. Success, here, was defined as a passing grade in English Composition I. However, this dissertation, and the others cited previously, model the trend of predictive variables and using data from sources other than the students in order to investigate retention and writing. More recently, a 2012 dissertation by Jeffery Bergin argued that retention is a topic that composition instructors (especially FYC instructors who teach online) need to pay attention to and address in their classrooms. The argument for action focuses around the field's established concern with digital literacies and offers specific pedagogical tools for instructors to implement in order to retain online first-year composition students. The focus is on a learner-centered online pedagogy that fosters persistence.

While Bergin's dissertation is useful in establishing the need and offering some solutions based on the research on online pedagogy, writing pedagogy, and retention studies, more research needs to be done to pull together the anecdotal/quantitative threads that exist in writing studies retention research. The document focuses on providing solutions geared toward the common predictors and institutional factors associated with dropping out. However, this approach is based on retention in general (and online). What it does not do is look at what might be particular to FYC online. This oversight is significant because Catherine Finnegan, Libby Morris, and Kangjoo Lee (2009) indicated that content and disciplinary differences between courses were important factors in student retention.

Aside from dissertations, journal articles published in English studies on the topic of student retention focus on the relationship between developmental English/writing courses and retention (Crews & Aragon, 2004; Gandy, 1998; Glau, 2008; McCurrie, 2009; Webb-Sunderhaus, 2010; Orbach, 1988). Specifically, these scholars investigate disenfranchised students and the idea that what these students specifically need to be successful may be different from students who are not already considered "at risk" (Glau, 2008; McCurrie, 2009; Webb-Sunderhaus, 2010).

For example, in her 2010 article about the trend of the elimination of basic writing programs from four year institutions and what should be done about it, Sara Webb-Sunderhaus says that "we must expand our conversations about equality of access to include calls for equality of success" (p. 99). She emphasizes that the disenfranchisement these students face in society is replicated in the academy and calls for a redefinition of access to include the kinds of access that would lead to success. Webb-Sunderhaus critiques Tinto's model of integration because even his revisions (that cover non-traditional and minority students) fail to take students'

abilities, desires, and motivations to integrate themselves into account, and questions whether all students can do the type of integrating Tinto deems necessary. A redefinition of access that includes student expectations might be necessary to account for the fact that students are individuals with unique backgrounds. Webb-Sunderhaus's central argument is that we need

. . . a theoretical and pedagogical framework that seeks to support and educate all students by supplying them with institutional resources . . . needed for academic success, while also being respectful of students' desires and goals and the conflicts inherent in any writing classroom. (2010, p. 110)

Thinking of access to preparatory information is one way we can redefine the way we help students gain access. My study is asking if a lack of access to this type of information might be affecting student expectations when enrolling in an online FYC course.

The scholarship on basic writing and retention offers new ways to think about access and how to help at risk students gain access once they're enrolled. For example, in a 2004 study by Dense Crews and Steven Aragon that investigated the impact of taking developmental writing on retention, they argue that remedial education is an intervention. They found that those who immediately took a developmental writing course were more likely to have a higher GPA and that GPA was a predictor for retention. The authors further the point that we should not conflate access to the classroom with access to tools necessary to be successful. Having access to information that would help clarify online FYC expectations, goals, etc. before students enroll might be one of those tools. This study aims to investigate that idea.

Two more recent articles that focus on retention in English studies are published in the *Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators* and *College Composition and Communication*. The 2008 WPA article, by Beth Brunk-Chavez and Elaine Frederickson,

identifies that very few studies focus on retention and the writing classroom, but that it is important for our field to be involved in these discussions. “Examining students’ attitudes toward learning, writing, and success might lead to programmatic changes that would help students do well in composition classes” (Brunk-Chavez & Frederickson, 2008, p. 92). Their goal was to test the predictor methods meant to identify students at risk for being unsuccessful at their own institution. They wanted to know whether or not placement scores correlated with student success. This study focused primarily on predicting whether or not students were successful, but did not investigate why these students were leaving. Evaluating the methods used for placing students and predicting their success is important because these tools label students. However, conducting only predictive studies limits the insight that we have for why students leave because these studies are based on assumptions that the predictive variable is the reason for being unsuccessful or successful. This limitation indicates that there is still a need to ask why students are leaving.

The second article, by Pegeen Reichert Powell, begins with the stories of three different former students that dropped out of college (and some even her class) for various different reasons. The purpose of sharing the stories was to show the “moments when our work as writing instructors intersects with the issue of retention” (Powell, 2008, p. 665). These intersections also occur in the field’s concern over student access to education, as mentioned in the basic writing retention literature. She argues,

Once students are in our classrooms, they have already . . . achieved access to higher education . . . . What we’re really talking about when we’re talking about the exclusionary practices of academic discourse and . . . Standard American English . . . is retention. (Powell, 2008, p. 673)

The idea that access is a retention issue emphasizes the importance of the field's involvement in the study of retention.

Powell (2013) is also the author of the only book on writing studies and retention. While she uses some ideas from her article, Powell also changes her tune a bit. She sets up an argument for kairotic pedagogy because many of the factors that influence students' decisions to drop out (family issues, money issues, etc.) are not factors that any teacher or administrator can control. She argues that we're going to lose students and there's nothing we can do about that. She encourages the field to focus efforts on educating those students sitting in front of us at the moment and being creative in our pedagogy in ways that educate the students in the lives they live now. Although Powell makes a good argument that we might not be able to stop all of our students from leaving (especially at open admissions institutions where being unprepared might be the issue), she does not take into account that online drop rates are higher than their face-to-face counterpart.

#### **2.4 Retention and Student Perspectives, Attitudes, and Expectations**

How students perceive their experiences in college has been shown to impact their attitudes toward the college (Campbell & Mislevy, 2012; Roberts & Styron, 2006). Student attitudes toward a course have a direct impact on motivation and success in that course (Ames & Archer, 1988). That is, if a student has a negative attitude toward a course or expects a negative experience or outcome, then their success both within courses and within college can be impacted (Ames & Archer, 1988; Campbell & Mislevy, 2012; Roberts & Styron, 2006). Pulling from M. Fishbein and I. Ajzen's 1975 book *Belief, attitude, intention and behavior: An Introduction to theory and research*, John Bean and Barbara Metzner suggest that

. . . attitudes lead to intentions, which in turn lead to behavior . . . the attitudes toward the academic experience at school should affect the intent to continue in school, which in turn results in a student's actually staying in or leaving school. (1985, p. 493)

This idea plays out in a 2012 study by Campbell and Mislevy. The researchers used a survey to determine predictors of student dropout. They found that general attitude toward the institution was a significant predictor of whether or not students would persist at the institutional level. Students with negative attitudes were more likely to drop out.

Some studies in retention and expectations pull from theories of work motivation in business studies. For example, in their 2011 study on motivation predictors and retention, Robert Friedman and Rhonda Mandel pull from expectancy theory. They pull from scholarship in Business Studies that focus on Expectancy theory and motivation in the workplace to explain "Expectancy theory states that motivation is a function of the perceived probability that effort will result in effective performance, and that effective performance will result in desired outcomes" (Friedman & Mandel, 2011, p. 3). They are suggesting that students are expecting to put in a certain amount of work in order to do well, and if those expectations are not met, then they are not motivated to continue putting forth effort. Expectations of effort required is just one factor in a student's motivation to continue putting forth the effort needed in an online class. Other studies of online retention have corroborated with this issue, but also found that students have other misconceptions about what is involved in taking an online class.

For example, in a 2011 study by Duncan G. LaBay and Clare Comm, the researchers investigated student choices in taking a course online by looking at factors of importance in the choice of courses, factors of importance in the content and other aspects of class administration, prior and current online course experience, attitudes and beliefs regarding online versus



traditional courses, and the demographic profile of the respondents. They found that students believed online courses had a greater workload and that they would learn less about the subject, the biggest perk was convenience and respondents perceived significant differences between online and traditional classes (what those differences were was not entirely clear though). They suggest, “If a traditional environment is the student’s expectation, then he/she is not a good candidate for on-line learning” (2011, p. 85). Robert Nash’s 2005 study also found that students who dropped or failed a course were more likely to believe online courses were easier than face-to-face courses, which “suggests the need to manage student expectations about this mode of learning, especially for those new to the format.” In short, not only do many students have misperceptions about what to expect in an online course, but those students also tend to be less successful (Moore, et al., 2003; Nash, 2005; Herbert, 2006). This correlation suggests that there might be a connection between expectations, experiences, and success.

Dat-Dao Nguyen and Yue “Jeff” Zhang found similar results in their study of student attitudes toward distance education in 2011. They concluded that students perceive more work and more material in online classes, but the class would be easier and that they would miss out on something present in face-to-face communication. Students’ perspectives, attitudes, expectations, and experiences in college courses all impact student retention. Pulling from Edwin Locke’s 1976 chapter on job satisfaction, Bean and Metzner suggest that

. . . it is the evaluation of our past experiences that gives rise to our attitudes. Therefore, it is the student’s experiences, both in and out of school, that influence the attitudes about his or her education and ultimately the decision to continue in school. (1985, p. 492)

Jalynn Roberts and Ronald Styron also suggest in their 2006 study on the connections between student satisfaction and persistence that expectations can influence student activity, which can determine whether or not this idea plays out.

When discussing the impact of student expectations on retention it is important to consider whether those expectations have been met by investigating discrepancies between expectations and experiences. For example, in a 2015 study by Jacob Pleitz, Alexandra MacDougall, Robert A. Terry, M. Ronald Buckley, and Nicole Campbell, the researchers specifically look at this discrepancy. The purpose of the study was to more accurately measure the discrepancy between expectations and experiences and to better understand how this discrepancy might influence student behavior. First, they found that the area with the greatest discrepancy was academics. They suggest, “many students are entering college with either unknown or naive expectations and, therefore, may be relying on false schemas to fill in the missing information” (p. 96). Second, they found that when there were greater discrepancies between student expectations and experiences in the areas of social life and institutional characteristics, that students are more likely to drop out. They did not find the same correlation between academic rigor and these discrepancies, but suggest that it is because they controlled for previous academic variables (GPA and standardized test scores). They do list some limitations and those limitations are largely why my study needed to be done. The focus, again, is on first-time college students entering directly from high school at a traditional on-campus four-year institution. Non-traditional and online students are not taken into consideration. Additionally, their study focuses on the institution at large, while I will be focusing on course level retention.

Michael Herbert applied the importance of investigating discrepancies between expectations and experiences and their impact on retention to an online setting in 2006. In this

study, the Priorities Survey for Online Learning was sent to anyone who had taken an online class at his institution. The survey asked for student satisfaction levels on the following variables: faculty responsiveness, quality of online instruction, timely feedback from faculty, timely feedback from the institution, frequency of student-instructor interaction, financial aid availability, and student collaboration importance. It was found that

Those students who did not complete their online course had a significantly lower level of expectations met by their course experience. With a decrease in meeting course expectations comes a corresponding decrease in engagement and motivation necessary to complete an online course. (Herbert, 2006, Discussion section, para. 3)

While this study did focus on online courses, the population was still considered traditional and was pulled from a traditional four-year institution.

## **2.5 Filling the Gap**

The retention studies literature has identified that it is important to study retention specific to disciplinary course work, that course level retention is a significant factor when considering institutional retention, and that online retention, specifically at community colleges, needs further study because scholarship has simply been applying theory from face-to-face four year institutions that does not align with the context of online instruction or the community college population. Retention scholarship has also indicated that student perceptions, attitudes, expectations and experiences can impact a student's decision to leave a course or institution. Retention is an important issue in the online first-year composition classroom because of the ties between FYC and the institution and, most importantly, because the goal of retention is education and "understanding why students choose to leave or choose to stay is essential to those wanting to make a difference in students' lives" (Fike & Fike, 2008, p. 2).

However, “too much research on retention focuses on predictors of student success or failure, rather than explanations” (Powell, 2009, p. 673). Instead of relying heavily on student characteristics and predictor variables to determine who is at risk, an investigation into the perspectives of the students deemed “unsuccessful” in an online first-year composition course might help to provide more explanation for why students are leaving our FYC online classes. While some retention scholarship does focus on the student perspective, most of it relies on questionnaires; the small percentage that does not does not focus specifically on the writing classroom. Discipline specific research tends to be done by those in the discipline. In the case of retention in writing classrooms, our research tends to focus on predictors of placement, basic writing courses, as those students are already labeled “at risk,” and reframing our conception of access. This study was conducted with the aim of gaining the reasons for leaving an online FYC class and to determine if expectations play a role. Eliciting this information from those who have left might help us to figure out how to help those students stay or help them return somewhere down the road.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **3.1 Research Assumptions**

This study is an empirically based research project. Empirical research is the systematic investigation of events or experiences for the purpose of gathering and analyzing evidence intended to answer a research question (or set of questions). It can be either experimental or non-experimental and it can collect quantitative data, qualitative data, or a mix of the two. It is the systematic study of something that is observable or based on experience (MacNealy, 1999). In order to be considered empirical research, a study should do the following: be planned, involve the systematic collection of data, and involve the systematic analysis of data. The research begins by stating a problem, like lower rates of retention in online classes versus face-to-face classes, and follows with a plan for carrying out the investigation of the problem that is focused around the research questions. The research questions for the problems this study addresses are:

- Why do students leave our first-year online first-year composition classes at a higher rate than face-to-face first-year composition classes?
- Is there a relationship between student expectations about the online version of the course or college and their retention in that course?

In rhetoric and composition, we often borrow from other disciplines and fields in order to do empirical research. Traditionally, the methods and methodologies we've borrowed have been effective; however, because of the "digital era" there are changes in our field concerning what writing is and where writing is happening, and "we need a parallel and equally dramatic change in our notions of methodology" (Porter, 2007, p. xiii). The traditional methods of collecting data may no longer be the gold standard — not because the field will no longer use traditional data

collection methods like interviews, but rather because we will be conducting them in a different way (Mueller, 2012). It is necessary to adapt our approaches to the specific context we are working. As Patricia Sullivan and James Porter say in their 1997 book *Opening Spaces*, “research methodology should not be something we apply or select so much as something we construct out of particular situations and then argue for in the write-ups of our studies. This notion sees methodology as heuristic rather than a priori determining” (p. 46).

That does not mean that we change “just because,” but that we expand beyond the “gold standard” when it is not sufficient for the study. Researchers should be “making methods their own” (Nickoson & Sheridan, 2012, p. 8). In light of the critical reflexive framework Sullivan and Porter establish and the many options for data collection, management, and analysis, the methodological decisions in this study of the perspective of the unsuccessful students in online asynchronous first-year composition have been reflexively considered and documented.

### **3.2 Methodological Lens**

#### **3.2.1 Researcher Assumptions**

Going into the project, I assumed that meaning is, in part, socially generated and that knowledge and what is “true” are often up for change and interpretation based on an individual’s experiences and as new ideas and processes are discovered. It is therefore assumed that there is value in collecting observable data from multiple sources. It is this assumption that drives me to study a different perspective on the problem of retention by systematically collecting and analyzing data. Just as knowledge is ever changing as we continue to learn, so are methodologies, and this study is conducted under that assumption as well. I came to this study hoping to gather data that would help students, teachers, and administrators better understand the nuances of online learning in the field of composition and felt that the perspectives of those who

are not retained might provide insight. The study was designed to gain access to this data in the most sensitive and ethical way possible.

### 3.2.2 Reflective Design

In *Opening Spaces* (1997), Sullivan and Porter emphasize the importance of reflection in research:

For the study of writing technologies, we advocate a view of research as a set of critical and reflective practices (praxis) that are sensitive to the rhetorical situatedness of participants and technologies and that recognize themselves as a form of political and ethical action. (p. 1)

Since the original publication of their book, which relied partially on feminist methodologies to create a critical framework, others have both echoed and emulated these ideas (Blythe, 2012; Jacobs, 2012; McKee & DeVoss, 2007; Powell & Takayhoshi, 2012; Romberger, 2007; Sheridan & Nickoson, 2012). Reflecting on each choice that is made and challenging assumptions during the research process is an important part of making any design ethical and sensitive to the participants involved.

In doing research, it is important to have a contextualized and reflective design because “methodology is always both political and ethical” (Sullivan & Porter, 1997, p. 39). Key to the design of this study were careful consideration of the participants’ sensitivity about being labeled a “failure” and encouraging them to provide more information. Additionally, the politics of “who” is doing the research at the institution played a role in this study. Ethics and sensitivity in qualitative research can be worked through by taking a critical reflexive approach to methodological practices. This approach aligns with my assumptions about knowledge in that it acknowledges “truth” as a moving target and that, as data is gathered and analyzed, ideas change.

It is pragmatic because a critical reflexive approach also acknowledges the ethical and political issues associated with research because research does not happen in a vacuum. This study is investigating a problem that is rife with both political and ethical issues, making this approach a necessary one. Each section of the study design in this chapter first describes what was done and why and is followed by a section that discusses the reflective considerations that were made.

### **3.2.3 Ethical Design**

Some of the general ethical issues in research design include power relations and researcher/technology ideologies. There are political power relations between researcher and participant as well as researcher and the discipline. It is also important to remember that “all research rests on the assumption of a norm, a standard of measure” (Sullivan & Porter, 1997, p. 39), and setting data up for evaluation against this norm might not be ethical. We always have assumptions and ideologies that come with us into a research project, just as the technologies and methods we use always have an impact on the research we do because they also carry their own assumptions and ideologies (Haas, 1996; McGee & Ericsson, 2002; Romberger, 2007; Selfe & Selfe, 1994). This makes data collection methods an important consideration in design. The technology used to collect data and why that technology is being used are critical to a study design that is sensitive to the context of the study (Hawkes, 2007; Rickley, 2007). The context of a study includes the site, the participants, my relationship to both, and the timeliness of the study (among other considerations). Reflexively and critically selecting data collection methods is important when studying why students leave online first-year composition from the unsuccessful students’ perspective. It’s a sensitive and complex situation that requires a sensitive, complex, and emerging research design.



### 3.3 Approaches and Approvals

This study has taken a mixed-methods approach in order to provide both quantifiable data about students' expectations, performance, and risk demographics, and qualitative data about students' reasons for not being retained, opinions on definitions of success and difficulty, and experiences. This design was done in the hope of finding a pattern in the responses of the participants. A concurrent mixed-methods approach was taken to develop a more comprehensive answer to the research questions. This approach also allows for the collection of data that will provide multiple angles on the topic of retention. It also aligns with my assumptions about knowledge. Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches allowed me to gather and analyze data (develop knowledge) that focused on specific variables (expectations and experiences) and did so from multiple individual perspectives. It is an approach focused on problem solving. Questionnaires were chosen as one tool for the study in order to reach a larger number of students and allow for both qualitative and quantitative inquiry. The second tool selected for this study, interviews, was selected to allow the investigator to gather richer qualitative data because interviews allow for closer observation of the participants' perspectives. A third, unexpected tool was a Progress Report Form created and completed by me in order to track student participation and final grades in Blackboard, an online learning management system. The "unexpectedness" of this tool will be discussed in the reflection portion of this section of the chapter.

Two Institutional Review Board (IRB) packets were submitted and approved. The first was an IRB exemption submitted to the Old Dominion College of Arts & Letters Institutional Review Board Committee (see Appendix A). This packet was submitted and approved under exemption category 6.2 on June 19, 2015. It required a description of the study, the research protocol, references, and the questionnaire and interview questions, as well as the informed

consent. The second packet was sent to and approved by the Northern Virginia Community College Office of Institutional Research (Appendix B). This packet contained a description of the study, an explanation of how NOVA will benefit, a description of the investigator's credentials, a copy of each instrument, and a signed agreement to send a final report to NOVA and comply with APA ethical principles. This packet also included the contact information for the investigator's immediate supervisor, an explanation of how the use of class time will be avoided or minimized, and an explanation of how the investigator planned to ensure that participants are aware that participation is voluntary. The original study design that was approved by Old Dominion University's IRB Committee was altered because NOVA's Office of Institutional Research (OIR) was concerned about violating the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the reporting of student success by instructors. Therefore, the packets in Appendices A and B have some subtle differences that will be discussed later.

### **3.3.1 Reflective Considerations**

Flexibility was key in receiving final approval for this study, and the politics of research (in this case, who is doing it) were very apparent when working with the OIR at NOVA. As noted, the methodology had to be changed because the OIR felt that the original plan of having students consent to have progress reports sent to me by instructors would violate FERPA. It was also indicated that having students check a box to indicate consent to be tracked in Blackboard was not sufficient. While the changes made to the study are beneficial in some ways (I was granted direct access to student activity within Blackboard), it was detrimental in others (requesting students to sign a consent form after completing the survey resulted in losing one third of the original participants). This change resulted in the creation of a more robust data collection tool for student participation than originally drafted. The communication between the

OIR and myself was lagging (oftentimes taking a week to get a response from the contact person) and often vague. This communication lag resulted in a delay in initial contact with the instructors, but did not delay the start of contact with the students.

### **3.4 Context and Participants**

NOVA is a multi-campus institution located across the northern part of the state of Virginia. Though the courses being studied are offered online, the campus that the courses are offered through is in Annandale, VA. NOVA Annandale serves approximately 23,000 students a year and the online courses at Annandale are offered through a NOVA-wide program called the Extended Learning Institute (ELI). ELI is responsible for designing (with help from content specialists across its campuses) and maintaining all NOVA-offered online courses. All ELI courses are evaluated using a Quality Matters Peer Review. Quality Matters is a nationally recognized non-profit organization that provides a comprehensive rubric intended to be used in the design of online courses. The rubric is based on research in online studies. All ELI courses are also “canned,” meaning that the courses come pre-designed with the exception of inserting dates and faculty information. Using the same course design with different instructors’ accounts for any differences in design that might affect a student’s success, whether perceived or real.

Each semester, NOVA Annandale offers a total of approximately 13 to 15 sections of ENG111–College Composition I and ENG112–College Composition II through ELI. The participants in this study were students enrolled in one of the 26 offered courses of ENG111 or ENG112 in the Spring 2016 semester at NOVA Annandale campus through ELI. The student cap for each class is 27. In order to disseminate the questionnaire, instructors were contacted and asked to announce and email a prewritten request for students to participate. Out of a possible 13 instructors teaching these two courses, eight were willing to send the questionnaire and sign the

consent to enroll me as a TA in their courses (see Appendix C), which resulted in a total of 17 courses contacted.

The desired number of students to participate in the questionnaire was approximately 30 and the desired number of students for the interviews was around 15. These numbers were drawn from my prior experiences with studying first-year composition (FYC) students. In the past, approximately two students per course participated initially and one student would complete the follow-up interview. Assuming the 15 courses that were expected, this number was simply multiplied by two and divided in half.

A total of 46 students attempted to take the questionnaire and 45 of those students agreed to the consent to take the questionnaire, while one student elected to not complete the questionnaire once the consent question was read. Of the 45 students who proceeded past the questionnaire consent, 27 (60%) were enrolled in ENG112 (College Composition II) and 18 (40%) were enrolled in ENG111 (College Composition I). This result is not surprising as it was the spring semester, so there would be more students taking the second course in the series. There were anywhere from one to seven students who responded from each of the 17 courses to which the survey was sent.

However, after the initial questions that granted consent and determined which course the student was in, the response rate dropped to 40 students. Of those 40, only 38 responses were deemed “complete” by SurveyMonkey, the host site of the survey, because they answered all the questions. Of the two deemed “incomplete,” one student did not complete the question about parental education and both students did not select an option for continuing (either not being entered into the drawing, being entered but not being contacted for an interview, or being entered and being contacted for an interview). Therefore, it was determined that the responses of these

two students were complete enough to include in the analysis of the questionnaire because the unanswered questions were demographic ones and there were several demographic questions asked in order to assess risk.

Of those 40 students, 36 selected the option to have their participation tracked and be contacted at a later date for an interview. Of those 36 students, 26 signed the consent form (see Appendix D) allowing the researcher to track their participation and final grades in Blackboard. Of those 26 students, 22 students passed the class and four students withdrew or stopped submitting assignments sometime during the course, which resulted in a grade of *D* or below. After courses ended, interviews were conducted. In addition to the tracked students, students who gave permission to be contacted for an interview but did not sign a consent form to be tracked were also asked for an interview.

The untracked students were asked about their final grade. Because it was self-reported, no other consent was needed. If they did not want to provide this information they were not required to (this was clearly indicated in the email request). There were a total of 25 successful and five unsuccessful participants. Out of the 30 interview requests sent, a total of 17 students completed the interview. There were 14 students who completed the interview that passed with a *C* or better, and three students who completed the interview that were deemed “unsuccessful.” For the purposes of this study, retained students are students that earned a passing grade (*D* or higher) in their ENG111 or ENG112 course. Unretained students include those students who dropped the course, withdrew, or stopped participating in the course (to include students who have earned an *F*, but due to no longer “attending” as opposed to submitting subpar work). This distinction is necessary to differentiate between students who may not academically be prepared and students who are not successful for other reasons.

### 3.4.1 Reflective Considerations

Some of the ethical questions considered in designing the data collection and collecting data from this population are:

1. Can the list of names of students who have withdrawn, failed, or stopped participating be ethically (and legally) accessed?
2. How can the interview questions be designed so that the questions are clear but students don't feel attacked or made to feel inferior?
3. How can the investigator avoid leading participants to answers?
4. How can these students be reached in situations of resistance to contact and no longer checking college avenues of communication?
5. How can rich data be collected in consideration of these questions?
6. How can this population be enticed to participate without being coerced?

The first two questions are better answered later in the chapter, when discussing the actual questions that were asked during data collection. The third ethical question hails back to the idea that both the researcher and the existing scholarship predetermine certain norms (Sullivan & Porter, 1997). In the case of this study, defining success is a norm to which we compare students and everything else is labeled failure. The significance is that students may not consider their performance in a class to be a failure if their goals have changed (Powell, 2013). In light of this issue, the investigator directly asked students how the course impacted their performance and focused some of the interview questions on how students perceived their performance while trying not to attach a connotation to the questions. This form of questioning was done to try to avoid making assumptions about the students, their experiences, and whether

or not those experiences and students were abnormal. However, after completing the analysis, even the successful students assumed a negative connection to the word “performance.”

The next issue involves access to students. Students deemed “unsuccessful” because they withdrew, stopped participating, or failed the course are also difficult to contact because they may no longer check school email, may have a disconnected phone line, or may not want to talk about perceived or labeled “failure.” They have become marginalized by the labels “unsuccessful” or “failure.” When dealing with sensitive groups, it is even more important to protect the participants from distress with careful wording, among other strategies (Liamputtong, 2007). I tried to address issues of contact by collecting outside contact information from all participating students before classes started. The original plan was to hire a group to conduct the telephone interviews as this group was better able to call more than once at various times of the day. However, funding did not come through, so I conducted interviews myself. I also offered the option of email interviews because sometimes it is easier to write about rather than talk about failure. The wording used in the collection of interview data will be further reflected upon later in the chapter.

Collecting rich data in light of these other potential issues is another consideration in this study. In addition to not wanting to talk about failure or not perceiving themselves as failures, this population attends class at a distance. Online students at a community college tend to also have full-time jobs, be full-time or single parents, and have a number of other obligations on their plates, making time to participate in research scarce (Fike & Fike, 2008; Finnegan, et al., 2009). These issues make it difficult to access the participants, and therefore the data. Because accessing these particular participants may be tricky, it is important to consider the ethics involved in getting in touch with them, getting them to sign, and getting them to talk. I elected to

use an electronic signature service (called HelloSign), shorter interviews (about 20 minutes), and offering both phone and email in order to address this issue.

Based on previous experience with online community college first-year composition students and scholarship on response rates for online surveys in teacher evaluation (Nulty, 2008), the survey was incentivized, which brought up the ethical issue of coercion. In order to negate the issue of coercion, I elected to offer a drawing for one of four gift cards for completing the questionnaire and the interview. This number was based on the number of possible students who might participate. It was assumed that there would be 15 sections with 27 students per section, so there were potentially 405 students to be entered into the first drawing. This assumption makes the odds approximately 1 in 100, which is not unreasonable. While it was difficult to estimate the number of possible interview participants, it made sense to make the same offer for the interviews to signify that they are just as important as the surveys. As it turned out, half of the participating courses started on the first day of the semester and the other half started during other sessions in the semester. There were two drawings for the questionnaire. The first drawing was for two gift cards with 25 students in the drawing; the second was for two gift cards with 14 students in the drawing. The amount of the gift cards was allotted at \$50 each because that is approximately the cost of a used course textbook. The drawing for the interviews was done about six weeks after classes ended so I could be sure no other interviews would be conducted.

### **3.5 Data Collection Methods**

In order to get to answers concerning why students leave our online first-year composition classrooms, the perspectives of students who have left are important. The best way to get to a “why” answer is with qualitative research. John Creswell, educational psychologist and leading methodology scholar in education, says that investigators “conduct qualitative



research because we need a *complex*, detailed understanding of the issue” (2013, p. 48).

Retention, as established in Chapter 2, is a complex issue and becomes more so when the online community college population is considered.

One way to approach this complexity is method triangulation. It is an important approach to a research study because it allows investigators to study more than one aspect of a particular situation (Cresswell, 2012; DePew, 2007; MacNealy, 1999). It is particularly useful in studying multiple features of a rhetorical situation (DePew, 2007). For example, in studying the perceptions of online first-year composition students, first sending a questionnaire to all students before the course starts, collecting data about student participation, and then following up with an interview of the students who consented to participate provided triangulation (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

<i>Instruments and Data Collected</i>			
	Questionnaire	Progress Reports	Interview
Types of Data	Responses to closed questions Responses to open-ended questions	Average Time Logged in Blackboard, Average Logins Per Week in Blackboard, Assignment Submission, Classmate Response Completion	Responses to open-ended questions Responses to closed questions

Ideally, these interviews would have been conducted with only the unsuccessful students, but as mentioned, it is difficult to convince this population to participate; so all willing students were interviewed. Triangulating in this way was intended to help with some of the ethical considerations needed in a study like this one by providing a space where students may feel less

pressured to participate as well as providing me with a variety of data from the same participants. These methods are a match for the assumptions, lenses, and ethical considerations being made in this study as they allow me to reflexively collect and analyze data from multiple angles while protecting the participants.

### **3.5.1 Instruments**

**3.5.1.1 Questionnaire.** Questionnaires are a useful tool for a mixed-methods study on expectations because they allow for closed and open-ended questions. These types of responses helped establish some demographic information and expectations before classes began. All students in the 17 FYC sections being studied were requested to complete a 23-prompt questionnaire at the beginning of the course (see Appendix E). The purpose of administering the questionnaire was to establish expectations of online first-year composition courses from the students' perspective. The questionnaire asked for contact information outside of the college system in the event that the student could no longer be reached through college communication avenues, to be contacted for an interview at a later date, and requested permission from the student to be contacted to sign a consent form for me to track participation in Blackboard. The consent form (see Appendix E) satisfied FERPA requirements as the student is allowing the information to be shared for the purposes of the study.

The first three questionnaire prompts were:

1. Which English course are you taking online through ELI at NOVA?
2. Which section of ENG111/ENG112 are you enrolled in?
3. Why did you choose to take the online version of ENG111/112?

The first two questions were asked to “ease” the participant into the questionnaire by opening with an easy multiple-choice question, but also made it easier to keep track of which

course students were enrolled in and the length of the course based on the section. The third question aimed to understand the motivation for online enrollment. This question is important to learning about student expectations because the “why” of taking online courses can illustrate their expectations and priorities. The next 11 questions in the questionnaire attempted to learn what students expected when taking an online FYC course with some questions that asked what they expected and a few follow-up questions asking for clarification. This focus on expectations is important because, as mentioned in Chapter 2, whether or not expectations are being met can impact how a student performs (Herberg, 2006; Moore, et al., 2003; Nash, 2005).

Some of these questions focused on communication expectations:

4. How often do you expect to communicate via email or course tools with your peers?

(For example, asking questions, responding to questions, etc.)

5. How often do you expect to communicate via email or course tools with your

instructor? (For example, asking questions, responding to questions, etc.)

6. How much effort do you expect to put into these communications?

Understanding student communication expectations is important because communication between student and instructor and student and peers has been noted as key to student retention (Finnegan, et al., 2009; Gayton, 2013; Komarraju, et al., 2010; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Powell, 2009; Powell, 2013; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 2006). These questions also gave examples of what I meant by “communication” to eliminate confusion. These questions offered specific as opposed to general multiple-choice answers; for example, offering a “Frequently” option would have been problematic because frequency can be subjective. Giving specific options for communication frequency allowed me to collect richer data from closed questions. The final option in these questions was “other” in order to cover any specific plans that participants had for

communication in the course. In the end, students identified feedback and quick email responses as instructor communication. They also created their own category with the “other” option: Necessary.

Other expectation questions asked about participation and coursework time, effort, difficulty, and learning.

7. How often do you expect to participate (including posting, reading, writing, brainstorming) in the course?
8. How much time do you expect to put into completing your assigned coursework?
9. How much effort do you expect to put into completing your assigned coursework?
10. How easy/difficult do you expect the course to be?
11. What makes a class easy or difficult?
12. What do you expect to learn about writing in this course?
13. Are you expecting your experience to be different than taking ENG111/112 face-to-face?
14. Why or why not?

The questions that asked about frequency asked participants to select from a list that includes options like “every day” to “not at all” and are based on the research about student activity within online courses (Finnegan, et al., 2009; Gayton, 2013). The “effort” questions in regard to communication and participation expectations provided a maximum to no effort scale that was selected because effort is also a subjective construct. The options for the amount of time students expected to spend on participation (which was defined for the students within the question) were based on the number of hours the college expects students to spend depending on the number of weeks in the course.

These questions were intended to help me understand the students' expectations for workload, but were also worded this way in order to avoid the suggestion that workload is the only way that a student might define the difficulty level of a course. I did not want to assume that students were associating effort with difficulty; hence the separate questions addressing each. These questions also aimed to help me understand what students were expecting to learn in order to revisit this question in the interviews by asking whether or not they learned what they expected. These questions were also designed to help me understand whether or not students expected the online version to be different from the face-to-face version of the class, and if so, what differences they expected. The importance of asking questions about student perceptions of differences between f2f and online is that these perceptions can set the tone for the student's performance in the course (Nash, 2005).

In a similar vein, some questions focused on knowledge of online learning:

15. Before you signed up for ENG111/ENG112, how much did you know about taking online courses?

16. How/where did you learn about taking online courses?

Understanding these expectations can help determine if a lack of understanding about online courses might be a contributing factor to a lack of success in online courses (Hachey, et al., 2012). In the remaining questions, I attempted to obtain background information based on some of the predictors of student success found in the retention literature. These include income, home support, institutional support, and previous academic performance (Boston, et al., 2012; Fike & Fike, 2008; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Nichols, 2010). The responses to these questions could help establish which students were at risk and whether or not they were successful.

*3.5.1.1.1 Reflective Considerations.* The terms “questionnaire” and “survey” are often used interchangeably. This study uses the term “questionnaire” because it is more often used in English studies. Surveys and questionnaires, while traditionally a method of quantitative data collection, have been used more frequently in qualitative and mixed-methods studies (Creswell, 2012; MacNealy, 1999). They can contain both open-ended and closed questions and can be disseminated via hardcopy, telephone, and the Internet. One of the affordances of paper-based questionnaires is that more people can be reached because it is not limited to only those with computer access (MacNealy, 1999). However, they’re also expensive to send out and often result in having to tabulate by hand. Two of the advantages of telephone questionnaires are the ability to get answers right away (mailed and email questionnaires can get lost in the shuffle) and accessibility for those with reading and/or writing issues (Fowler, 2014; MacNealy, 1999). The disadvantages to phoning, though, are cost and the fact that people are less likely to be open and honest in a situation where they may feel like they’re not entirely anonymous (Fowler, 2014; MacNealy, 1999). Web-based questionnaires have the advantage of low cost, high-speed return (potentially), time provided for thoughtful answers, and not having to share, out loud, with another person. The biggest disadvantage is getting participants to cooperate (Fowler, 2014).

The best possible dissemination method depends upon the population. The population in question should theoretically already have access to the Internet in some way because they enrolled in an online course. Therefore a web-based survey tool was used and was emailed through the Blackboard course system by course instructors. Ideally, the questionnaires would have been sent out to all students before the semester started in order to reach all possible participants. However, because I was required to wait until a hardcopy of the approval through NOVA was in hand, not all of the participating courses sent the survey out before the semester

started; therefore, the questionnaire was open for the first four days of class. The courses that started later had a smoother start to the questionnaire dissemination and so it was sent out on time. In order to account for the likelihood that most students would not elect to participate, the questionnaire ended with the option to be entered into the Amazon gift card drawing.

The questionnaires were also web-based to help address some of the ethical concerns presented earlier. Web-based questionnaires reduce the issue of power relations between researcher and participant since they are self-reporting. Another positive outcome of the self-reported questionnaire is that it allows students to help define the “norm” of “success” through their own responses.

The questionnaire was also meant to help establish a positive rapport with students by establishing the focus of the study on student expectations and success without a focus on failure. The informed consent was worded in such a way that it was not misleading, but also not off-putting. After running a pilot study in the summer of 2015, no questions were changed as the responses were akin to what I was expecting/hoping to receive.

**3.5.1.2 Student Progress Report Forms.** This tool, in its final format, was not a part of the original design, but when the design was changed to add me as a TA to the Blackboard courses, it became necessary. Originally, I was planning to send the instructors a form every four weeks or so that asked for the students’ names, time of last login, and whether they passed, failed, or withdrew. Being able to access participation information allowed for additional, richer data to be collected directly. I still created a form in order to methodically collect the information. The form had a space for the student’s code, the length of the course, the weeks included in the report, the last date the student logged in, the time the student spent logged into

Blackboard per week in the two-week span,<sup>2</sup> the number of logins to Blackboard each week, the time spent logged into Blackboard per day of the week, and their activity in discussion forums, blogs, and groups on Blackboard. This information was collected to get an idea of the time students spent on the course. The questionnaire and interview both ask about time and the frequency students expected to spend and did spend both in the course and in communication with instructors and classmates.

Additionally, the form had space to indicate whether assignment types (blogs, discussion forums, major assignments) were submitted on time, late, not at all, or were ungraded/untrackable. Discussion forum entries also had a space for the average length and frequency of the posts. Submission information was collected because in an online course, submitting assignments is the primary way that student participation is counted. It takes the place of both attendance and class participation. Post length and frequency were collected because discussion forums are often the primary form of communication in an online course and are considered a community-builder (Warnock, 2009).

All of this participation data was collected because no one type of data really gives the entire participation picture in an online course. This is also true of face-to-face courses as we don't often see the writing and reading students do at home, but for online students we also do not see "in-class" participation. I hoped that by triangulating participation through time spent, assignment submission, and student reporting, that a clearer idea of student participation frequency would emerge. The final pieces of the participation picture were collected in the interview. Participation data is so important because it is a significant marker for retention (Finnegan, et al., 2009). Finally, the form had an entry for the student's final grade in order to

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<sup>2</sup> Learning Management System tracking does not account for walking away from the computer or time spent on other activities. This will be addressed in Chapter 5.



compare expectations and “success” and determine which interview template to use. It was anticipated that all willing students would be interviewed, but the interview questions would be altered individually based on the student’s “success.”

*3.5.1.2.1 Reflective Considerations.* The Progress Report Form was filled out using downloaded reports, Performance Dashboard, and the grade book in Blackboard. Every two weeks, I ran weekly “Student Overview for Single Course” reports. These reports provided the login and time spent information for the forms. The “Single Course User Participation Report” was considered, but provided the percentage of time students spent in content areas and did not seem to add any additional information. Additionally, while the student overview reports were populated because they provided time spent in different sections of the course in addition to time of last login and time spent overall, it was found that this feature was not reliable. Oftentimes, students had logged hours in Blackboard, but nothing was recorded to show where they specifically spent their time. This result could be because they logged in and did not “do” anything or something faulty occurred with Blackboard. It is impossible to know, so this feature was not used. Performance Dashboard provided information about discussion board participation and the grade book provided information about major assignments and blogs. Other reports were considered, but they focused on the number of hits that items had as opposed to time spent, which did not fit with the focus of this study.

**3.5.1.3 Interviews.** The interviews began as soon as I had access to Blackboard and was able to see that students were dropping the course. The interviews were approximately 20 minutes long and focused on identifying the reasons that students dropped the composition courses, reporting time spent and difficulty, whether or not they felt that their expectations were met, and factors impacting performance (see Appendix F). The participants were given the

choice between an email or a telephone interview, and if they were not responsive to the preferred method, the other form of interview was attempted. There were 17 students who preferred an email interview, eight students who preferred a telephone interview, and three students who did not indicate a preference. Out of a possible 30 participants who agreed to be contacted for an interview, a total of 17 interviews were conducted. I wrote the interview questions, and the email interviews were sent using my Old Dominion University email account. I transcribed the responses from the telephone interviews into the email interview template in order to keep all the interview data together. The first nine interview questions asked some open and some yes/no questions with a series of prompts to try to get more information out of the participants. The following questions are in italics and are accompanied by an explanation of their purpose as well as prompts used in the interview process.

*What life events (such as a death in the family, illness, additions to the family, etc.) have you experienced since the course started?* The purpose of this question was to encourage participants to consider what outside influences might have impacted their success. In the follow-up questions, I asked if the student felt that the event had any impact on their performance and why they felt it did or did not.

*Did you learn everything you expected to in the course?* In the follow-up prompt, I asked what exactly it was they were hoping to learn. This question was asked because some of the previous research, especially in rhetoric/composition studies in retention (Powell, 2009; Powell, 2013), indicates that students might just leave because they got what they wanted/needed out of the course. While this reason might be the case for retention at the institutional level, it is not clear if this reason would also be the case at the course level. This question was crafted in order to determine if that is the case.

*We are contacting you because (it appears) you are no longer active in the course. Why did you [withdraw or stop participating] in the course?* The purpose of this question was to directly ask why the student was not being retained. While a direct question like this one might be a bit off-putting, it is a question that is asked to students in other retention literature. In previous scholarship, though, this question is often accompanied by a list of choices. Leaving this question open-ended allowed the student to consider why without being led to any particular answer. The follow-up prompts for this question included asking for more details, such as whether it had to do with the other students, with the course content, with the instructor, or with difficulty level, and then how these things impacted their decision to leave. There was no equivalent to this question in the interview template for the successful students.

*Do you feel you were successful in the course up to the point where you [withdrew or stopped participating]?* In the follow-up prompt for this question, I asked what parts of the course experience made them feel that way. The purpose of this question was to understand how the students defined success and whether or not their goals being met was a reason for not meeting traditional definitions of success. Additionally, the follow-up question was intended to help me understand whether or not the feeling of success (or failure) was related to their experience in the course. Again, there was no equivalent for the successful interviewee.

*What do you feel were contributing factors to your performance in the course?* The purpose of this question was to approach the third question at a different angle as it is less direct and allows the student to list things that might have made them perform in a certain way. Follow-ups for this question included asking if the student felt that their course performance was negative or positive and what might have been done to make it positive if it was negative.

*What internal course factors (the instructor, other students, course difficulty, etc.) impacted your performance in the course?* This question was asked in addition to the previous one in order to identify any course-related issues. The answer to the previous question may have included factors that had nothing to do with the course, so this question aimed to hone in specifically on any problems that could be solved by the college or any positive impact the course factors had that the college could reinforce.

*Did your experiences in the course live up to your expectations?* The purpose of this question was to find out if there is a connection between expectations and retention. Initially, the prompts for this question were supposed to be specific to the questionnaire responses from the beginning of the semester. However, the OIR required consent from students in the questionnaire in order to do this and it was not included in the questionnaire consent. Therefore, I did not pull specific information from the questionnaire responses. Instead, the follow-up questions asked in what ways the course matched their expectations and in what ways their experiences did not match their expectations. The purpose of this follow-up question was to get the participants to think more deeply about why it didn't meet their expectations.

*In what ways was the online writing course similar to a face-to-face writing course? In what ways was it different?* The follow-up prompt was whether or not they felt that taking the course face-to-face would have impacted their performance. The purpose of these questions was to discover student opinions on the differences between face-to-face and online writing courses now that they've had the experience of the online course. While not all participants have taken a college writing course face-to-face, they most likely have taken high school writing courses face-to-face, which may impact their expectations for all writing courses.

*Do you feel you were prepared for the challenges of online learning such as time management, time spent, technical issues, self-discipline, and feeling isolated from peers?* The purpose of this question was to discover whether or not the students had an understanding of the challenges of online learning, as only seeing the benefits and not the challenges might be a contributing factor to not completing a course and would be another misalignment of expectations and experiences.

The next five questions were pulled from the questionnaire and reworded to reflect the experiences of the students as opposed to the expectations. They were all closed questions. These questions asked how often they communicated with peers and the instructor, how much time they spent on coursework, how difficult the course was, whether or not they received support from friends and family, and what student services they used. These specific questions were selected because the answers to these questions might help to show whether or not there was a disconnect between expectations and experiences. The final question asked students if there was anything that might have helped them complete the course. While I would have liked to include the majority of the questionnaire prompts, it was not practical in the interest of keeping the interview at a reasonable length.

*3.5.1.3.1 Reflective Considerations.* There are four common ways to conduct an interview today: in person/face-to-face, video conference, email, and telephone (Gillham, 2005; Opdenakker, 2007; Salmons, 2012). Interviews provide information not available by simply observing an individual and they allow for more prompting than a survey or questionnaire does, which allows for more control over the type of information that is collected (Creswell, 2012). Interviewing can be face-to-face or at a distance, synchronous or asynchronous, and structured, semi-structured or unstructured.

In-person, face-to-face interviews are considered the gold standard for interviews because of the social cues exchanged and the rapport that can be created by having a face-to-face conversation. “Social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language etc. of the interviewee can give the interviewer a lot of extra information that can be added to the verbal answer of the interviewee on a question” (Opdenakker, 2007). However, these advantages of traditional interviews are hampered by some of the ethical considerations of power balance and leading the participant to responses that the interviewer wants or expects (Gillham, 2005). Another constraint of in-person, face-to-face interviews is that the responses are filtered through the interviewer, though it has been noted that having participants co-author the work or provide feedback on the interviewer’s analysis is a way to improve this disadvantage (Selfe & Hawisher, 2012; Sullivan & Porter, 1997). Additional constraints include cost for traveling to participants or limiting samples because of the costs of travel.

Video-conferencing interviews are face-to-face interviews and have many of the same affordances of the in-person version except that the interviewer can’t control the environment and some of the body language is not observable (anything aside from facial expressions) (Gillham, 2005; Salmons, 2012). Video-conferencing constraints include technological access and know-how for both the investigator and the participant. Not everyone has a webcam or the ability to use the software. It can create a learning curve for the researcher or cause participants to not want to participate (especially if technological issues arise). One of the benefits of these synchronous face-to-face forms of interview include creating the space to allow for the social narration of the participants’ stories. Allowing them to work through the story as the interviewer is trying to learn it from them creates space for the social creation of knowledge (Selfe & Hawisher, 2012).

Telephone and email interviews allow for certain amounts of anonymity, which can often lead to more disclosure from participants, especially those who are part of marginalized groups (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Gillham, 2005). For telephone interviews, the perceived anonymity comes from the lack of face-to-face communication (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). However, they also have the advantage of the exchange of some social cues, though less than are apparent in face-to-face methods, and they allow participants to control the setting so there's less pressure (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Gillham, 2005). One drawback to telephone interviews is that the researcher does not have direct physical contact with participants. This lack limits communication to verbal (body language/facial expressions) and may affect the investigator's ability to understand the perceptions of the participant (Gillham, 2005). Telephone interviews can also be costly, though they are less so than face-to-face interviews.

Email interviews are more cost-effective than any other type of interview, more convenient than face-to-face for many participants because they can do it "on their time," and allow for longitudinal study in ways telephone interviews do not (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Opdenakker, 2006). However, because the interviewer cannot see the interviewee, they do not have access to the physical communication that is so highly valued. There might also be issues in self-reporting as well as equipment issues (Creswell, 2012). The physical distance between the interviewer and interviewee can also reduce the students' self-consciousness because they can't be seen, which makes them feel somewhat anonymous (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

While conducting interviews by email sounds like it would solve some logistic and ethical problems due to the cost factor, the way it balances power, and the anonymity it provides, it might not be the best choice for this group of participants due to the possibility that being unsuccessful in an online writing class might be related to the fact that it is a writing class — not

because it is online. Whether it is a fear of writing, a dislike of writing, or the inability to write coherently, requiring participants who are unsuccessful writing students to write out their responses might not elicit rich data. In-person, face-to-face interviews are not possible because of cost, scheduling difficulties, and importance of timeliness. Video-conferencing, while it might be more feasible with this population because they would appear to have more technical know-how, might be problematic because the unsuccessful might actually have been so because of problems with the technology. Telephone interviews appear to provide the best balance because the interviewee feels less self-conscious and is more likely to disclose information, which would provide richer data and may “make up” for the loss of social cues. Telephone interviews also can help balance out the power that physical presence can sometimes provide to the interviewer.

Although neither phone nor email interviews are perfect, it might be that together, they’ll work wonderfully. In McCoyd and Kerson’s article (2006), they used three different types of interview methods, gave the participants a choice, and found no difference in the data collected among the methods. Combining methods might be an effective way to conduct interviews for the richest data. Giving participants a choice allows them to decide which type of interview best suits them instead of relying on my assumptions that writing might be a problem or that they’d prefer the telephone interview so they could hear the person they’re responding to. Offering both types of interviews would also allow for an emerging methodology as the questions for both interviews could be altered as data is coming in.

During the pilot, the participants were successful ones, so in order to test the interview questions, some changes were made to the wording of the questions. In conducting the interviews, email interviews were requested by both participants. I sent an email that contained both a Word document and a link to a Google Form. The two options were provided in the hope



of gaining maximum participation. Specifically, the Google Form was used because it would allow for easy mobile completion. One student completed the interview, and that student used the Google Forms option. Overall, the pilot indicated three things: (a) I should provide the two options for the full run of the study, (b) no changes were needed to the questions because no follow-up questions came to mind, and (c) the interviews should be sent to both the successful and the unsuccessful students.

### **3.6 Study Timeline**

#### **3.6.1 Establishing Contact**

I first attempted to learn what kind of access I would have to students in online first-year composition (FYC) classes at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC, but commonly referred to as NOVA) through the assistant vice president of the Extended Learning Institute (ELI), but was unable to get a response. I then contacted my supervisor, who put me in contact with the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at NOVA. I was told that the OIR does not provide data for individual studies. Therefore, I arranged to receive, from the Assistant Dean of the Languages and Literature Division at the Annandale campus of NOVA, a list of instructors that were slated to teach ENG111 or ENG112 during the Spring 2016 semester. I was hoping to contact instructors in late October 2015 to ask for volunteers to send the questionnaire to students enrolled in their spring courses. This plan changed, however, when the Proposal to Conduct Research at NOVA was returned by the OIR because of concerns over having instructors provide grade information about students. After some negotiation and revisions to the proposal, it was decided that I would, instead, be added as a teaching assistant (TA) to Blackboard. Blackboard allows anyone in a teaching or administrative position to produce reports for specific students and to only view the approved students in the grade book. Once

approval to move forward was given, I was required to have the official document in-hand before contacting instructors. This process, however, took three months, resulting in not contacting the instructors until December 20, 2015. Because it was going out so late, the Assistant Dean at NOVA forwarded the request and then sent a reminder on January 4th, 2016. I then contacted instructors individually on January 11.

### 3.6.2 Administering the Questionnaire

For the instructors who agreed to help before the term began, I requested that the questionnaire be sent as an email about three days before the first day of classes with a reminder sent on the first day of classes. The instructors who agreed to participate after the course started sent the questionnaire as soon as possible. The questionnaire was closed four days after classes started for each start date during the semester (see Table 3.2). Instructors were then asked to sign a consent form (using HelloSign) that would allow me to be added to their relevant courses as a TA.

Table 3.2

#### *Data Collection Timeline*

Data Collected	When
Questionnaire	January 8-14, 2016 January 29-February 4, 2016 March 11-17, 2016
Progress Reports	February 1, 8, & 22, 2016 March 7 & 21, 2016 April 4 & 18, 2016 May 2 & 11, 2016
Interviews	Withdraw/Participation Stop (First interview: February 15, 2016)

After the questionnaire was closed, I compiled a Google Sheet with student contact information, course number, course length, and instructor. Students were then assigned a code and sent a consent form that, if signed, allowed me to collect biweekly progress reports and the students' final grades. Out of 36 students that agreed to be contacted for the interview, 26 signed the consent form. Consent forms were then printed and mailed to the Office of Institutional Research. After the OIR office signed for the forms on February 1st, I contacted instructors to be added as a TA. As soon as I was added, I began completing progress reports. This was done again for the 12-week and fourth 8-week sessions. Because half of the courses started January 11th and the rest started by March 14th, the questionnaire drawing was divided into two groups competing for two gift cards each.

### **3.6.3 Completing Progress Reports and Conducting Interviews**

Progress reports were completed every two weeks. When students disappeared from the course, I contacted them. In order to establish a good day and time for an interview, I emailed the eight students who preferred a telephone interview. In those emails, I also offered to send a personalized link to the email interview in case the students changed their minds. This preference was the case for all of the participating students that initially preferred the telephone interview. However, there was a student who indicated that they preferred an email interview on the questionnaire, but decided, on the second prompt, to ask for a telephone interview. Students were contacted in their preferred form a total of three times, and the fourth was done using the other interview method. Gift card drawings were completed after I was sure no other students would volunteer for an interview.

### **3.6.4 Reflective Considerations**

The pilot was useful in making changes to the “when” of the questionnaire. For the pilot, the “initial” email was sent five days in advance and one day after classes started (because only one person responded). The original plan was to send out the email request to students one week before and three days before class started, but in the pilot, only one person responded before class started, and it was the day before. The other respondent replied two days after class started and one day after the final reminder. I concluded that realistically, students are not going to bother with anything that looks like schoolwork more than one to two days before class starts. Extending a few days after the start date also allows those who did not jump right into the coursework to participate, which may in fact get at the target population. In fact, there were two 8-week courses that started January 11th that were not sent the questionnaire because the instructor felt that by the time the questionnaire was sent, the students were too far into the coursework to really provide expectations based on what they knew before the class started. Initially, upon sending coded progress report forms, the instructor in the pilot study admitted not completing the forms because they were coded and it required going back to dig up the code sheet. In order to have better instructor participation, student names were going to be used on the forms and then scrubbed of identifying information when I received them; however, because I was populating the form myself, it was unnecessary.

### **3.7 Data Management Methods**

This section of the chapter will discuss the steps taken and electronic methods used to prepare the data for analysis after it was collected by the instruments previously discussed. It was necessary to move the data to a place where the information collected by all three methods could be compared side by side. The best place for this comparison was Google Sheets, as it allows for

multiple sheets and the integration of the graphs and table created into Google Docs, which is where I began working on this document.

### **3.7.1 Questionnaires**

The questionnaire was designed using SurveyMonkey and was administered by having instructors send an email with the request to participate to their students. Because there were three different start dates, the survey was closed and then opened again using three different collection links. SurveyMonkey both collects and manages data using statistics, but the data was transferred to Google Sheets for further quantitative and qualitative analysis.

### **3.7.2 Progress Reports**

These forms were created in Google Forms using my NVCC account. This was done because Google Forms populates into a Google Sheet. To make sure that all the data was populated into the same Sheet, the same Form was used each time a report was completed. In order to prepare the data for analysis, the Sheet was organized by student code and every other student code section was highlighted. The first column and first row were also frozen in order to begin counting and averaging time, logins, and submissions.

### **3.7.3 Interviews**

For the email interviews, students were provided three options. They could either complete a personalized Google Form that stored the data in my NVCC Google Account, complete and email a Word document, or respond in-line to the sent email. I created a Google Form template for each “type” of student: successful, unsuccessful, and untracked. These templates were then named with the students’ individual code and the personalized link was sent in the request email. In the end, all participating students submitted the Google Form. Google Forms populates into a spreadsheet, which made it easy to copy and paste the data in order to

store all the responses together. The telephone interview was both recorded and transcribed into the student's personalized Google Form. The data from each student's populated Sheet was then copied and pasted into an Interview Master Sheet.

#### **3.7.4 Reflective Considerations**

Initially, I intended to use NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, to manage both the qualitative and quantitative data. This program was going to be accessed using a "floater" license in the department. Because I did not feel it was easy to access this license, I switched to Dedoose, a web application for mixed method analysis. After trying to analyze the data in Dedoose over the course of the week, I realized that electronic coding was not conducive to spreading the data, nor was it possible to complete the coding without access to the Internet. If the analysis was going to get done it was going to be by hand.

The switch to Google Sheets was a natural one as this dissertation was written using Google Docs. This program allowed for all data and write-up to be stored in one location. Multiple sheets made it easy to keep track of both qualitative and quantitative data as well as graphs. Graphs and charts are also easily inserted into Google Docs and updated if changes to the data that created the graph are made.

### **3.8 Analytic Methods, Adjustments, and Justifications**

This section of the chapter focuses on how and why I analyzed the data the way that I did. Therefore, the paragraphs in this section will explain what I did in the chapters to come. The results and findings will be discussed in Chapters 4 through 7. Those chapters all follow the same format, described in the following paragraphs in order to better outline the approach taken to analysis and discussion.

To begin, I first grouped the responses to the questions from the questionnaire into categories: communication expectations, participation and coursework expectations, expectations specific to online courses, and expectations of students. This final category grouped together the responses to the questions used to collect data that are often used to predict student success. Each chapter reports the results of relevant questionnaire data (including the percentage of students) displayed in an appropriate graph. This analysis was done to establish expectations. Additionally, it was found that the responses to some questions (such as how many hours students expected to spend) might be dependent on the length of the course the in which the student was enrolled, so this data was divided up by course length as well.

Each chapter follows the same format when determining whether or not expectations are met and how that relates to success. After the results from the questionnaire are reported, the results from the Blackboard reports and the interview that focus on meeting expectations are then reported and compared to the expectations using visual aids and associative statistics. Then, the outcome of whether or not expectations were met is compared to student completion of assignments and final grades using tables and predictive statistics. Finally, the outliers in each category are discussed.

The final data analysis chapter is a bit different in that it first presents the data gathered from the questionnaire that establish the institutional expectations of students, then compares them to student success using predictive analytics. Then, the student interview responses that discuss success, performance, and influencing factors are analyzed and discussed. The following sections detail the steps taken in the analysis of the data.

### 3.8.1 Communication Data

Since SurveyMonkey already provides a nice, easy-to-read descriptive statistic chart for closed questions, it was used to report the descriptive statistics for the closed communication frequency and effort questions. The questionnaire analysis began after the final questionnaires were collected at the beginning of the fourth 8-week session (March 2016). SurveyMonkey also provides graphs showing the data for each question. However, you cannot edit these graphs and they are not formatted in the correct style. Therefore, the closed questions were transferred over to a Google Sheet because not only does Sheets allow users to generate graphs, it also will, as mentioned earlier, allow users to insert a graph from a Sheet into a Google Doc.

Once the descriptive statistics were reported for communication frequency and the data was transferred to Google Sheets, the data was divided by course length to determine if there was an impact on how often students expected to communicate with peers and instructors. This analysis was first done descriptively and then associatively. None of the responses to closed questions resulted in a normal data distribution and the sample size was relatively small. Initially, I expected to be able to use a Chi-Square Test to determine whether or not there was a relationship between some of the variables. However, in order for the Chi-Square Test for independence to be valid, the expected count for each cell should be at least five. Partially because the data set is so small, all relationships tests showed more than 20% of expected cell counts at less than five, which violates one of the rules of the test. Therefore, the test could not be performed. Instead, I conducted a Fisher's Exact Test, which is the test used when a population is too small for a Chi-Square Test to be valid. Both statistical tests test for independence between the variables and were run using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) through ODU MoVe, the remote desktop application for ODU students. The



results of these tests are reported in three separate sections in Chapter 4 in order to establish student expectations for communication frequency and effort.

Because communication expectations were found to be independent of course length, they were not divided by course length for the calculations in the analysis of the data to determine if expectations were met. In order to determine if peer communication frequency expectations were met, I counted the number of required responses for each course included in the study and the number of weeks for which responses were required. The number of weeks that required responses was reported and presented in a graph, and then the average number of responses was calculated, reported, and presented in a graph.

Then, in order to format the data in a way so that comparisons to student expectations could be drawn, I used the data to create two new data sets. The goal was to format the data by how frequently students had to respond to classmates using the categories assigned in the questionnaire and added the categories that developed by the “other” option. The resulting categories were More than once a day, Every day, A few days a week, Once a week, Once a month, Twice a month, Once a semester, Twice a semester, As necessary, and Not at all.

In order to assign the Blackboard data into one of these categories, I assumed that students were behaving in one of two extremes: either responding to classmates all in one day or spreading the responses out over the course of the week so that no more than one response was completed on any given day. This calculation was done because it represented the two possible extremes and it is assumed that student behavior would fall somewhere between these two categories. In order to complete the calculations, I took the number of weeks in each course and divided it by the number of weeks that required responses. This number was then divided by four (assuming approximately four weeks in a month). This calculation gave an average as far as the

number of times responses were required each month. Then, in order to calculate the other extreme, I took the number of “monthly” required responses and multiplied it by the average number of required responses for that course. Then, this number was equally divided over the course of the month.

For example, when considering the 16-week ENG112 course, four of the 16 weeks required responses, so responses were required once a month. Then, the number of monthly responses (one) was multiplied by the average number of responses for that course (two and a half) to get two and a half responses a month. This number was approximated to twice a month. When looking at the spread of required responses, although this method did not always exactly reflect what was happening in the course each week, it did give an accurate average that could be compared to students’ expectations and experiences.

This data was then compared to student expectations of peer communication frequency. This analysis was done by setting up a table with three columns. The first contained the expected frequencies, the second contained the frequency required by the course, and the third was used to code the differences between the two. The codes were based on whether or not the course requirements were *Less*, the *Same*, or *More*. This data was then reported and displayed in a graph that showed both extremes (post once a week and post once per day).

After it was determined whether or not expectations were met, the results were compared to student success. First, I calculated and reported the percentage of completed classmate responses for each student, and a Fisher’s Exact Test was used to determine if there was a dependent relationship between course length and response completion. This analysis was first done by course and then recalculated so that the results could be reported together. This calculation was done because ENG111 and ENG112 required a different number of responses.

In order to test for an association between expectations and success in the course, a table was created with the total number of students who fell into the frequency categories established in the questionnaire and the categories “successful” and “unsuccessful.” Additionally, a statistical test that looks for association called the Goodman and Kruskal’s Lambda Test was run. This test was used because it tests for association between a multinomial independent and dependent variable. It was the best fit for the data. Then, the outliers in peer communication frequency expectations, percentage of completed responses, and success were analyzed. This calculation was done by first analyzing the expectation, response, and success data for the students who responded with an “outlying” expectation, then for the students who were not successful, and then for the students who were successful but completed less than 75% of the required classmate responses.

The next step was to report the data regarding peer communication from the interview. The totals from the peer communication frequency question were reported and presented in a graph. To begin comparing these responses to the expectations established by the questionnaire response to the same question, both sets of data were presented in a line graph. In this situation, because I was planning to compare changes in responses, only the data from those who completed the interview were pulled from the questionnaire. In order to run the statistical analysis of peer communication frequency before and after the course, I converted the categorical responses to numbered responses. This conversion was acceptable because the categorical data was ordinal, so numbering the categories from 1 through 9 was appropriate. In this case, 1 was Every day, 2 was A few days a week, 3 was Once a week, 4 was Once a month, 5 was Twice a month, 6 was Once a semester, 7 was Twice a semester, 8 was Necessary, and 9 was Not at all.

Having done this, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test could be used. This test is a non-parametric test that is used when the data is not normal, but requires ordinal or continuous variables. This test is specifically used to compare pre-test responses and post-test responses within group responses. It was used to determine if there were significant changes between students' expected frequency and reported frequency for peer communication. There are other tests that compare these types of data, but they either require normal distributions or binomial variables, and so the data did not fit. To set the data up for this test, the difference between the two sets of data were coded *Less*, *Same*, or *More*. This variable was then used as the independent variable. Final grades were coded Successful or Unsuccessful and were the dependent variable. To determine if this difference led to success, a table was created to display *Less*, *Same*, *More*, and the number of successful and unsuccessful students in each category. Additionally, a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test was run for the same reasons noted previously.

I then reported the data from the interview regarding instructor communication frequency that determined whether or not those expectations were met. This data was then visually compared to the expectations established in the questionnaire using a line graph. This comparison was followed by the Wilcoxon Sign Rank Test for the same reasons identified in the peer frequency section above. Because the response options were the same for this question, they were dummy-coded the same. So, for instructor communication frequency, 1 was *Every day*, 2 was *A few days a week*, 3 was *Once a week*, 4 was *Once a month*, 5 was *Twice a month*, 6 was *Once a semester*, 7 was *Twice a semester*, 8 was *Necessary*, and 9 was *Not at all*.

Once it was established whether or not expectations were met, in order to determine if expectations impacted success, a table was created that reported the sum of each established difference (*Less*, *Same*, *More*) for each success category (*Successful*, *Unsuccessful*). Again, a

Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test was run because it predicted an association between an independent and dependent variable that are both multinomial in nature. The final analysis in regard to instructor communication frequency was performed on the outliers. The unsuccessful student data is discussed, as well as the two students who reported expectations outside of the distribution range.

The final section discusses communication effort. It was not possible to determine if expectations were met, but it was possible to determine if expectations impacted success. To do this, I first reported the descriptive statistics from the expectations data. A table was then created to compare expectations to success, and a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test was run.

### **3.8.2 Participation and Coursework Data**

I then moved on to analyze the data regarding participation and coursework. Because participation in an online course is difficult to track, the data collection and analysis was triangulated. This chapter analyzes student expectations based on time spent on coursework, the number of logins to Blackboard, and the number of graded assignments. In order to establish expectations in this chapter, SurveyMonkey was again used to provide descriptive statistics for the relevant questionnaire responses to closed questions. This data was also transferred to Google Sheets so that it could be divided by course length to determine whether or not course length impacted student responses. This impact was determined by creating side-by-side bar graphs and conducting a Fisher's Exact Test because the data was not normally distributed: the sample size was small and there were too many empty cells to run a Chi-Square Test.

**3.8.2.1 Participation Frequency.** In order to determine whether or not student expectations were met in the area of participation and coursework, analysis began with the average time logged per week in Blackboard. This data was put into the time spans established in

the questionnaire and then reported and presented in a graph. This result was then visually compared to student expectations for time spent that were established by the questionnaire. A table with three columns was then created. The first column contained the expected time, the second contained the logged time, and the final column was filled in to indicate whether or not students spent *Less*, the *Same*, or *More* time based on Blackboard information. This data was then reported and presented in a pie chart. With so few categories, a pie chart was the best way to present the results.

The reported time spent on coursework from the interview responses was then written up and presented in a graph. The results were then visually compared to student expectations using a line graph and statistically compared using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. Again, the graph choice was the best visual because it showed the distribution and the statistical test was the best fit for the data because of the small sample size and the “pre” and “post” forms of the questions.

To determine if met expectations led to success and visa versa, I populated tables that showed how many students both logged and reported Less, Same, and More and their corresponding success in the course. This calculation was followed by a Goodman and Kruskal’s Lambda Test because this test establishes an association between independent and dependent multinomial variables. Finally, the outliers discussed in this section were unsuccessful students, a student who expected to spend a significant amount of time, and a student that did spend a significantly greater amount of time than classmates.

The second angle in analyzing whether or not participation expectations were met is login frequency data. I calculated and reported the average number of logins per student per week from the Blackboard course reports. The data was then converted to the participation frequency categories established in the questionnaire: More than once a day, Once a day, 3-5 days a week,

and Once a week. Logins were broken down to 0, 1-2, 3-5 (this result would suggest a few days a week), 6-8 (this result would suggest approximately once every day), 9-14 (this result would suggest up to twice a day), 15-21 (up to three times a day), 22-29 (up to four times a day), 30-37, 38-45, 46-52, and 53-60. A Fisher's Exact Test was run to see if there was a relationship between course length and the number of logins because shorter courses may result in more frequent logins because there are more required assignments per week. The login data was then visually compared to the expected participation frequency from the questionnaire.

Then, in order to determine if expectations were met by logins, a table was set up with three columns. The first column contained the expected frequency from the questionnaire, the second column contained the actual frequency from Blackboard login data, and the final column was used to compare any shifts from expectations to actual participation by coding these changes Less, Same, or More. This same coding system was used to compare expectations to success by creating a table with the sum of each code (*Less*, *Same*, *More*) and whether they were ultimately successful or unsuccessful. This data was also run through a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test using the codes *Less*, *Same*, and *More* as predictors for success.

For the final point in the participation triangle, I took the number of assignments required for each course and divided it by the number of weeks in the course to get an average number of assignments per week for each course. This number was then converted to the participation frequencies from the questionnaire: More than once a day, Once a day, 3-5 days a week, and Once a week. The data was then entered into a table with three columns. The first column was the expected frequency, the second column was the participation frequency expected by the course based on the number of course assignments, and the third column was used to code the shifts as *Less*, *Same*, or *More*.

In order to determine whether or not met expectations led to success, I created a table with the sum of the codes *Less*, *Same*, and *More* as they corresponded to being successful or unsuccessful. These codes were also used as the independent variable in a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test. This test was run to determine if having expectations met could predict success. As noted previously, the test is used for data that is not normally distributed with multinomial variables.

**3.8.2.2 Difficulty.** The next data point was to report and graph the responses from the interview question that asked about the difficulty level of the course. This data was then visually compared to the expectation data using a bar graph because it did the best job of showing the differences. Then, because the question fell into the pre-test/post-test category and the data was ordinal, a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was run. In order to run the test, dummy variables were created. These were 1=*Very Difficult*, 2=*Difficult*, 3=*Somewhat Difficult*, 4=*Somewhat Easy*, 5=*Easy*, 6=*Very Easy*.

After the statistics from the responses to closed questions were completed, I analyzed the responses to open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were exported, scrubbed for uploading to Dedoose, and labeled with the corresponding student code before being uploaded to the program. However, as mentioned above, after trying to make digital coding work for a week, it was replaced with hand coding. This allowed me to code in places where Internet access or computer access was not possible or practical. After reading the responses five to six times, the responses to open-ended questions were coded with what Johnny Saldaña calls "Eclectic Coding" and Categorizing (2016). Eclectic Coding is when two or more "first cycle methods" are being used simultaneously. In this case, InVivo coding, descriptive coding, and sub-coding were used. InVivo coding pulls the codes directly from the data, descriptive coding summarizes



the data, and sub-coding adds more detail about each code (Saldaña, 2016). The responses to the difficulty definition question in the questionnaire were also coded for blame. These codes were then put into categories based on the theme of the code (Saldaña, 2016). After the larger themes were established, tables were created to show the larger categories, the codes that fell into those categories, and some sample responses that led to these codes. Some student responses ended up with more than one code because they provided more than one reason, expectation, or definition.

After the questions were analyzed and reported, I took the codes from the open-ended question that asked how students defined “difficult” and ran a Fisher’s Exact Test to see if there was a relationship between expected effort and how difficult students expected the course to be. No other statistical tests were run from the questionnaire data for this chapter, as they did not seem to be necessary in determining what students’ expectations were.

In order to compare met expectations to success for this area of participation and coursework, a table was created that contained the sum of how many students found the class to be *Easier*, the *Same*, or *Harder* and their corresponding success. Again, a Goodman and Kruskal’s Lambda Test was run in order to determine if difficulty expectations being met could predict student success in the course. The outliers in this section were the unsuccessful students and students who reported the course to be more difficult than expected.

**3.8.2.3 Learning.** Next, I focused on student learning. The responses to the interview question that asked whether or not they learned what they expected to learn were printed, read six times, and then coded in a two different ways. The first round of coding was looking for both explicit and implicit *yes* and *no* responses. The second round of coding looked to summarize what the students said they expected to learn and what they actually did learn. The second round of coding used the methods described previously in this section. The *Yes/No* response, the

categories, the codes, and student example responses were placed into a table. In order to compare this data to expectations, I created a table with three columns. The first column contained the codes produced by the questionnaire question on expected learning. The second column contained the codes for the interview question on learning what was expected. The final column was used to compare differences between them. This data was then reported and discussed.

To determine whether or not met expectations led to success, I compared the number of students who answered *yes* and *no* to the question of whether or not they learned what they expected and how it corresponded to their success. The *Yes/No* responses were used as the independent variable in a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test to determine if there was a predictive relationship between learning what they expected and success. This test was used because the data was not normally distributed and though the variables were binomial, and so could have been run through a logistic regression, the small sample size made the non-parametric test the best choice.

### **3.8.3 Online Courses**

The next chapter analyzes the data concerning online courses. The expectations were established, again, by the questionnaire responses. The first question asked students why they took the course online. This data was also analyzed using what Johnny Saldaña calls "Eclectic Coding" and Categorizing (2016). The results were placed in a table along with student sample responses. The next question asked if students expected the online version to be different from the face-to-face version, and this data was reported and graphed in a pie chart. The follow-up question asked "why or why not." The responses to this question were coded using descriptive

coding and sub-coding again in order to establish positive, negative, or unclear attitudes toward online learning.

**3.8.3.1 Online Versus Face-to-face.** There were two interview questions that asked about online learning. The first asked for similarities and differences between online and face-to-face classes. The responses to this question were printed and read through about six times and then the responses were coded. The first round of coding was done using a form of provisional coding (Saldaña, 2016), as codes used were from the online differences questionnaire prompt. The second round of coding involved using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding. All of the codes were then categorized. They were then grouped into *Similarities* and *Differences* and the categories, final codes, and student response examples were reported in a table.

This data was then coded an additional time for attitude using values coding (Saldaña, 2016). These results were reported in a table and then compared to student attitudes generated from the questionnaire by creating a four-column table. The questionnaire codes were listed in the first column, the codes generated by the interview were listed in the second column, the third column was used to indicate changes (*None, Positive, Negative, Both*), and the fourth was used to determine if the codes in the interview were the same, similar,<sup>3</sup> or different. This data was then reported and presented in individual graphs.

In order to analyze whether or not met expectations led to success, the sum of *Yes* and *No* and corresponding success was placed into a table. This data was also analyzed using a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test with *Yes/No* being the independent variable to test if met expectations could predict success. This test was run because it tests for the likelihood that an

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<sup>3</sup> Similar codes are those that may have fit into the original code, but were more specific. For example, a code in the questionnaire might be differences in execution and in the interview the code resulted in personal preferences because the student identified a specific execution as a personal preference.

independent variable can predict a dependent variable for small sample sizes that are not normally distributed. Additionally, a table was created that reported how many students' attitudes went up, down, or remained the same and their corresponding success. This data was also run through a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test with the changes in attitude being the independent variables. Again, this test was used because it is meant to determine predictive relationships between two multinomial variables that are not normally distributed. The outliers in this section were the unsuccessful students and a student who indicated both a positive and negative attitude toward different aspects of online learning.

**3.8.3.2 Knowledge and Preparation.** The second interview question concerning online learning asked about student preparation for the challenges of online learning. This data was first coded for *yes* and *no* responses (both implicit and explicit). Then, the responses that had more than just *yes* and *no* were coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding. These codes were then put into categories. Whether or not they were prepared and the categories, codes, and student response examples associated with each example were presented in a table. The *yes* and *no* responses were then compared to how knowledgeable students reported being in the questionnaire. Both data sets were converted to dummy variables. For the knowledge data, the categories were 1=*Not at all*, 2=*Not very*, 3=*Somewhat*, and 4=*Very*. For the preparation data, the categories were 1=*Yes* and 0=*No*. In order to determine if prior knowledge could predict how prepared students felt, a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test was run. This test was appropriate because the data was not normally distributed, the sample was small, there was a multinomial variable, and it tests to see if an independent variable can predict a dependent variable. Because I did not find anything significant, a Fisher's Exact Test was run to determine if there was any relationship between knowledge and preparation.

To determine whether or not met expectations led to success, I compared prior knowledge to final grades and reported them in a graph. I then took the sum of students who felt prepared and did not feel prepared and compared these to their corresponding success. The outliers in this section were those who were unsuccessful and those who felt the least knowledgeable about online learning prior to the course.

### **3.8.4 Institutional Perceptions and Student Perspectives**

The final data analysis section of this chapter focuses on analyzing and discussing both the data that was collected about the students that are often used as predictors of success as well as the data collected to gather student perspectives about performance.

**3.8.4.1 Institutional Perceptions.** The first section of this chapter focused on determining whether or not a few commonly noted retention-predicting factors did indeed predict whether or not students were successful. First, the questionnaire responses were reported in percentages and then reported in graph form. Then, in order to determine if there was a predictive relationship between these risk factors and success, a binomial logistic regression was run. This test was selected because it does not make assumptions about the normality of the distribution of each variable and it is a test used to predict an outcome that is dichotomous (in this case, “successful” or “unsuccessful”). In order to run the regression, the following variables reported in the questionnaire were converted to dummy variables: *Financial Aid*, *GPA*, *Support*, *Parental Education*, and *HS Graduation/GED Year*. *Financial Aid*, *GPA*, *Support*, and *HS Graduation/GED Year* were all coded for *At Risk* or *Not at Risk* based on the literature for each type of data collected. These were then coded as 0=*At Risk* and 1=*Not at Risk*. However, because there’s no distinct “line” for *Parental Education*, it was coded in the following way: 0=*No HS Diploma/GED*, 1=*HS Diploma/GED*, 2=*Some College*, 3=*Associate’s Degree*, 4=*Bachelor’s*

*Degree*, and 5=*Graduate Degree*. The regression was then run using SPSS, a statistical software program, and the results were reported.

However, just because the data seems to fit, that does not mean that a small sample size is not a problem for certain statistical tests, but a small sample does allow me to look at the data “by hand.” In this case, I set up a Google Sheets page with the student codes and whether or not the individual students were at risk in each of the predictor categories. Beginning with the unsuccessful students, I reported whether or not these students had risk factors that might have predicted this outcome, and then reported and discussed the number of risk factors for the successful students as well.

**3.8.4.2 Student Perspectives.** The second section of this chapter began with the interview question that asked students if their expectations about the course were met. The responses were first coded for *yes* or *no*. They were then coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding. These codes were then categorized and the results were presented in a table that included the categories, the codes, and the student example responses. I then compared whether or not students thought their expectations were met by creating a table with the sum of students who reported each response and their corresponding rate of success. These results were also run through a Goodman and Kruskal’s Lambda Test because the sample was small and the data was not normally distributed.

I then moved onto the student perspective of success and performance by analyzing the question that asked whether or not students had a significant life event occur during the course and whether or not it impacted their performance. This question was first coded for *yes* or *no*. Then, it was coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding. In this case, the sub-coding was

whether or not the student felt that the event impacted their performance. The codes were then put into categories and presented in a table along with student response samples.

The next performance questions asked students what factors impacted their performance. There were two questions: general factors and course factors. Both sets of responses were coded using InVivo and descriptive coding. These codes were then put into categories and presented in a table with student response samples. The results were also values coded, looking for whether or not students felt their performance was positive or negative and whether or not the factors were positive or negative.

The final performance question asked students what frustrations they encountered. These responses were coded using InVivo and descriptive coding, and the codes were put into categories. I constructed a table that included the categories, codes, and student response samples.

The final section of this chapter analyzed the questions specifically asked of the unsuccessful students. The two questions were “Why did you stop participating?” and “Do you feel you were successful up to the point where you stopped?” These questions were coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding. Because there were so few unsuccessful students interviewed, the results of both questions were presented together in a table.

**3.8.4.3 Reflective Considerations.** While it would have been more convenient to complete the analysis using only two computer programs, the reality of the requirements for style guides and a full schedule led to a few places where data was analyzed and managed. In the end, it may have been easier to create the original questionnaire using Google Forms, but SurveyMonkey did allow for more peace of mind as far as security of student information goes, because students were submitting sensitive contact information. Regardless, the extra steps that

were taken in order to create the proper graphs helped me to become more familiar with the data before conducting the statistical analysis. Additionally, the time spent scrubbing the data for entry into Dedoose had the same result. It provided more time with the data before analysis, despite taking extra time. Luckily, a Fisher's Exact Test is run by also running a Chi-Square Test, so the results are presented together. This meant that I did not have to take extra steps and run two tests, once it was determined that a Fisher's Exact Test should be included with the Chi-Square Test.

Once I began analyzing the data for Chapter 5, deciding what should be compared and the resulting statistics became less cut-and-dried. While data was collected on effort, this segment ended up not playing a significant role in the analysis. Additionally, I collected data concerning student services, but they were not analyzed because the way in which the data was collected made it impossible to tell if there was a change in expectation. The data is not useless, however, as the institution might be interested in knowing which services are not well known and how students are learning about and using the services offered.

Choosing a statistical test is not an easy task. There are many assumptions that have to be met in order to use specific tests. Friedman's test was considered instead of the Wilcoxon, but the data did not fit the assumption of how many times the post-test was administered. McNemar's test was also considered, but requires two dichotomous variables. When it came to predicting student success, I eventually turned to the sources that used statistics to head in the right direction. Most of them used multiple regression, but that was not appropriate for this study because the dependent variable must be on the continuous scale. Dichotomous variables do not fit this key assumption. In the end, adapting to unexpected outcomes was necessary in almost every aspect of this study.



## CHAPTER 4

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNICATION EXPECTATIONS AND SUCCESS

#### **4.1 Summary of Results**

##### **4.1.1 Expectations**

There were three questionnaire items that asked for student expectations concerning communication. The first asked how frequently students expected to communicate with peers, the second asked how often students expected to communicate with instructors, and the third asked how much effort students expected to put into communication. This chapter will use the responses to the first two questions to establish the expectations, explore whether or not those expectations were met, and analyze the impact of whether or not expectations were met on student success. The responses to the final question will establish effort expectations and compare those expectations to final grades.

The answers to the questionnaire items that are analyzed in the next few pages and center around communication revealed that, fortunately, most people expected to regularly communicate with both their classmates and their instructors and put at least an average amount of effort into these communications. Surprisingly, they expected to communicate more frequently with classmates than instructors. This result might suggest that students are still expecting the course to be “self-taught” but are aware of the discussion board assignments that are part of many online courses today. This result is a bit troubling as it might be that students are not likely to reach out for help or for clarification until well past when they should have or that they only communicate with the instructor for that reason as opposed to communicating with the instructor in the discussion boards (answering questions and becoming involved in an actual

discussion). It also might suggest that students are not expecting to receive feedback beyond points earned from instructors on a regular basis. This would be an area of further study.

#### **4.1.2 Meeting Expectations**

The data that allowed me to analyze whether or not student expectations were met came from two places: Blackboard and the interview. The Blackboard data set provided information about the number of responses to classmates required by the course and the number of those responses that were completed. The interview data set provided responses to questions about how frequently they communicated with classmates and instructors.

Together, this data suggests that student expectations of peer communication frequency were not met, but instructor communication expectations were met. Some student interview responses indicate that more communication was required, while others indicate that less was required. This result is significant not just because expectations are important (Campbell & Mislevy, 2012; Roberts & Styron, 2006; Friedman & Mandel, 2011), but also because communication is a foundation of community building (Morris & Finnegan, 2005; Finnegan, et al., 2009; Gayton, 2013), and community building is often lauded as key to success in online classes (Morris & Finnegan, 2005).

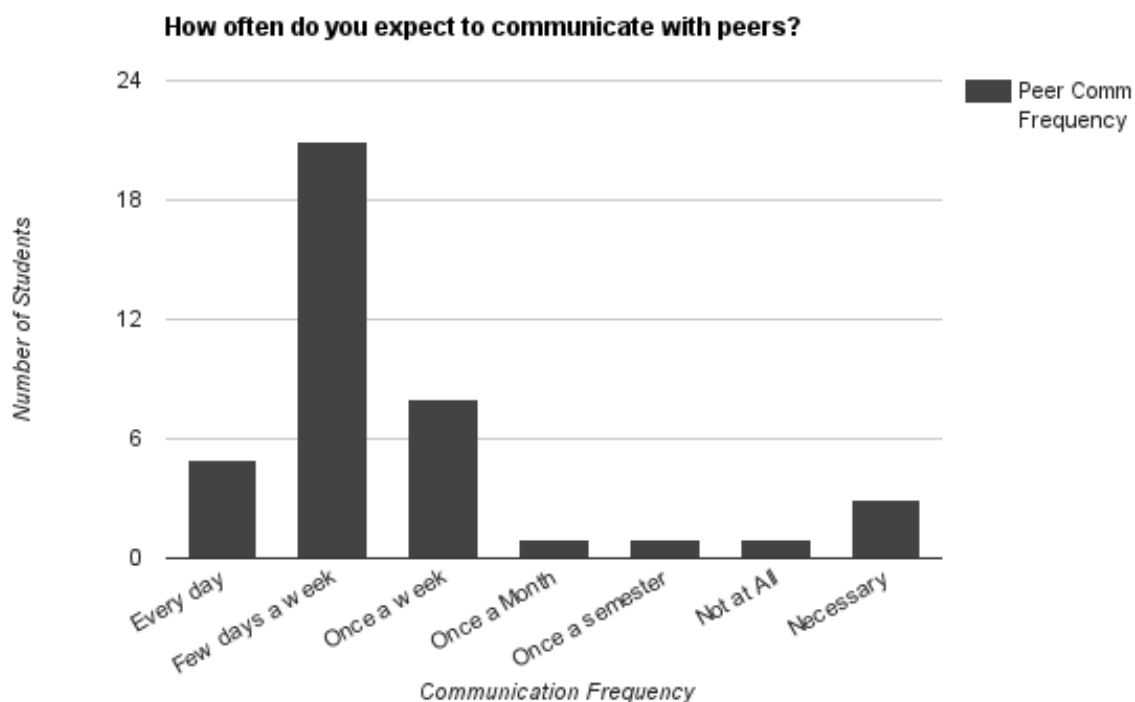
#### **4.1.3 Expectations and Success**

In order to compare communication expectations to success, the data concerning whether or not expectations were met was compared to both classmate response submission data and students final grades. The analysis was done using summary tables and predictive statistics. Overall, the results suggest that there is no statistically significant connection between student communication expectations being met (or unmet) and student success in the course, but the size of the sample may impact the statistical results. This possibility is discussed later in the chapter.

## 4.2 Peer Communication

### 4.2.1 Expectations

The first communication item on the questionnaire, question six, was: “How often do you expect to communicate via email or course tools with your peers?” Out of the 40 questionnaire respondents, the majority (85%) indicated that they expected to communicate with peers at least once a week, with over half indicating the expectations to be a few times a week. A small number of students expected to participate less frequently with 2.5% (one student) expecting to communicate with peers once a month, 2.5% (one student) expecting to communicate once a semester, 2.5% (one student) expecting to never communicate with classmates, and three students (7.5%) selecting “other” and indicating that they would do so as needed (see *Figure 4.1*).



*Figure 4.1.* How often do you expect to communicate with peers? This chart illustrates how often students expected to communicate with classmates.

The responses to this question were then broken down by course length to see if there was an impact on expectations of communication frequency with peers. There were 17 students enrolled in an 8-week course, 17 student enrolled in a 16-week course, and five students enrolled in a 12-week course. When breaking this question down by the length of the course, it was found that for 8-week courses, the percentages didn't change significantly. Regardless, the majority of these students still expected to communicate a few days a week. This comparison of peer communication frequency by course length can be seen in *Figure 4.2*.

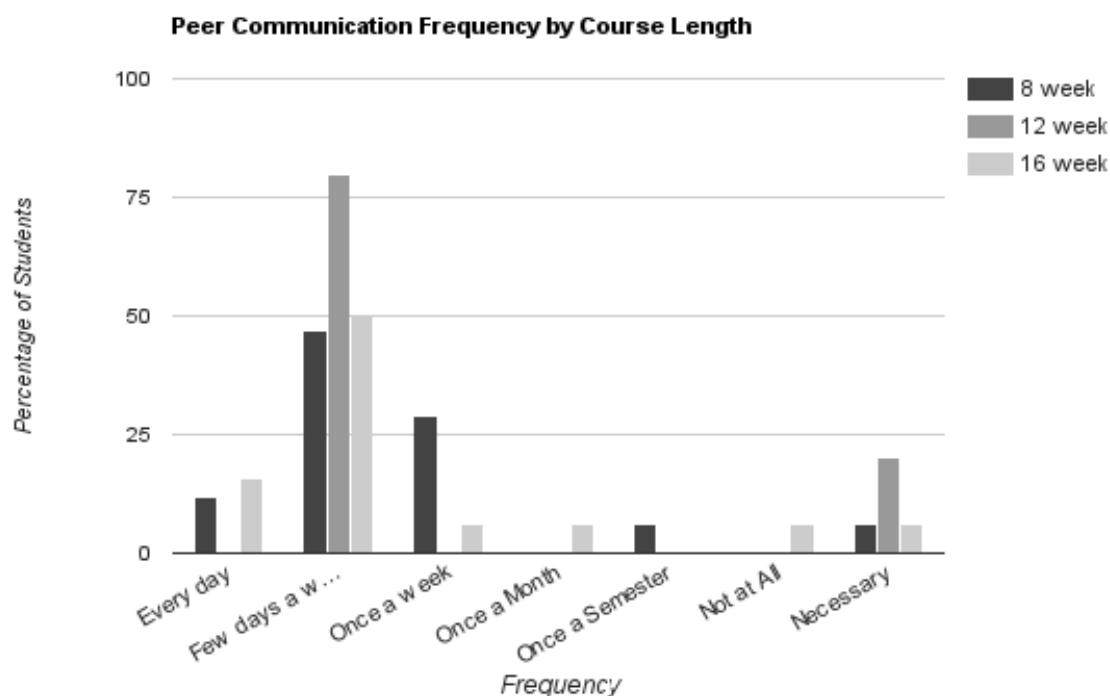
About 12% of students indicated that they expected to communicate with peers every day, about 47% of students indicated expecting to communicate a few days a week, 29% selected once a week and 6% indicated once during the semester, and 6% selected "Other" and indicated expecting to communicate with peers only when necessary. No students in the 8-week classes selected once a month or not at all. So the percentages are approximately the same for the 8-week classes as they were for all survey respondents indicating that course length does not impact student expectations for how frequently they'll be communicating with peers. To test this relationship statistically, a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>4</sup> was run and resulted in no statistical significance ( $p=.818$ ) between course length and expected peer communication, meaning these variables are independent of each other. This result was interesting because the 8-week courses consolidate the 16-week version, which often results in more than one discussion board a week.

For the 12-week course, 80% (four students) selected a few days a week and one student (20%) selected "Other" and indicated that they'd do so when necessary. As noted, while these percentages aren't exactly the same, the small number of 12-week students is problematic. There were only five respondents that were enrolled in 12-week courses, and this analysis resulted in

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<sup>4</sup> This test was run because it is the statistical test used in place of Chi-Square test of Independence when the data does not have a normal distribution and more than 5% of the cells are empty in the Chi-Square test. The purpose is to test for a relationship between two variables to determine independence.

percentage differences, but ultimately, the majority is still the same: most students expected to communicate a few days a week.



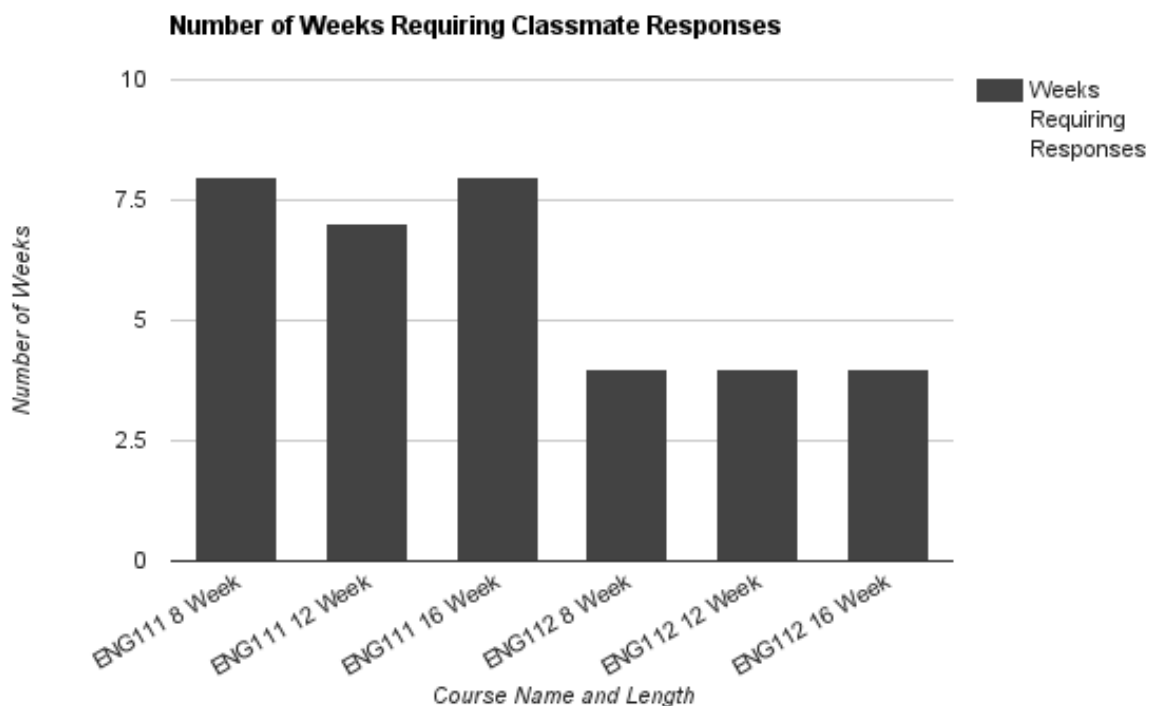
*Figure 4.2.* Peer Communication Frequency by Course Length. This graph illustrates, by course length, the frequency with which students expected to communicate with classmates.

Overall, these results suggest that students expect to communicate with peers on a regular basis. This is a refreshing result as it suggests that students may even want frequent peer interaction, which, as discussed earlier, may increase their sense of belonging (Arbaugh, 2010; Dziuban & Moskal, 2001; Morris & Finnegan, 2005; Schlossberg, 1989; Swan & Shea, 2005; Tinto, 1975; Wu & Hiltz, 2004). This sense of belonging does neatly tie into Tinto's theory of social integration (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 2003; Tinto, 2013).

#### 4.2.2 Meeting Expectations and Success

When analyzing whether or not student expectations of peer communication frequency were met, two angles were taken. The first was to consider whether or not expectations were met by the course requirements. This calculation was done by counting the average number of weekly responses required by the course. The second was to consider the student perspective. This calculation was done by asking students to report peer communication frequency by responding to a question in the interview that asked how frequently they responded to classmates during the semester. Whether or not expectations were met by the course was then compared to both student completion of the required responses and student overall success. Then, whether or not the reported frequency in the interview met expectations reported in the questionnaire were compared to overall success in the course.

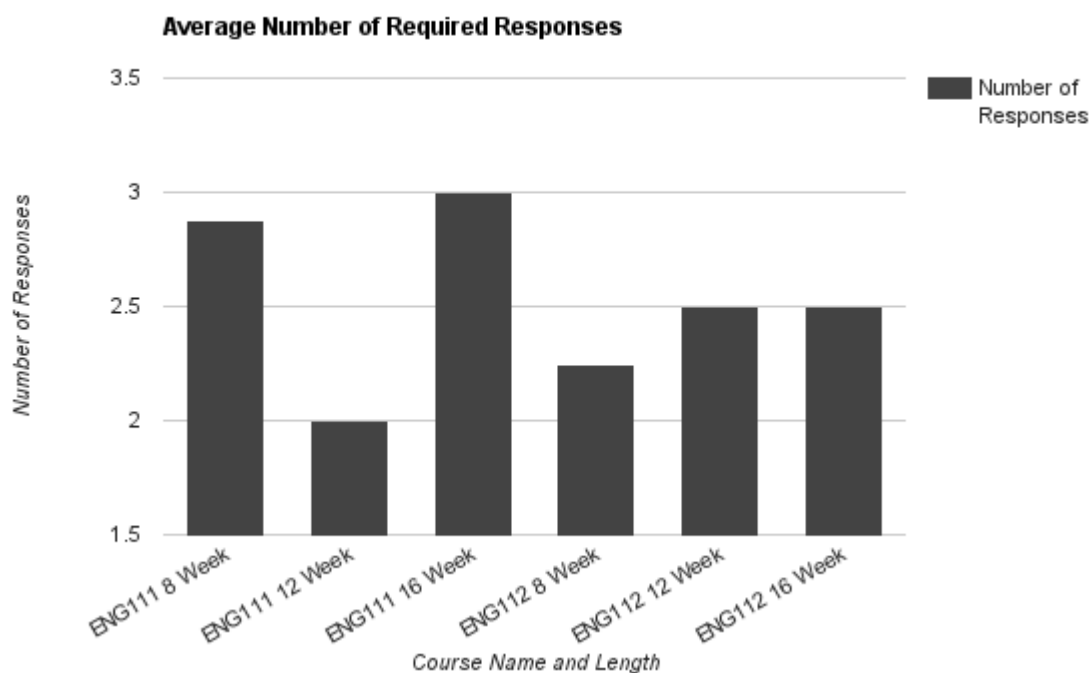
**4.2.2.1 Course Required Responses Meeting Expectations.** First, I collected data from the course content in Blackboard concerning how often responses were required. For ENG111 8-week courses, responses to classmates were required every week (see *Figure 4.3*). The weeks required responding to between one and six classmates, depending upon the assignments. On average, students were required to respond to two to three classmates a week (see *Figure 4.4*). For ENG111 12-week courses, students were required to respond to classmates one to three times in seven out of the 12 weeks. On average, students were required to respond to one to two students. For ENG111 16-week courses, students were required to respond to two to five students during eight of the 16 weeks.



*Figure 4.3.* Number of Weeks Requiring Classmate Responses. This graph illustrates the number of weeks each course required students to respond to classmates.

For ENG112 8-week courses, students were required to respond to two to three classmates (see *Figure 4.3*) during four of the eight weeks (see *Figure 4.4*). For ENG112 12-week courses, students were required to respond to two to three classmates during seven of the 12 weeks. The ENG112 16-week courses required responses to two to three students during four of the 16 weeks. Of those required responses for the 12- and 16-week ENG112 classes, one week was during the group project where students were asked to “actively participate” in the discussion. The 8-week courses listed a specific number of required responses for the same

assignment.



*Figure 4.4. Average Number of Required Responses.* This graph illustrates the average number of classmate responses required for each course for the weeks they were required.

In order to begin assessing whether or not expectations were met, I took the average number of required responses and the number of weeks responses were required to create two sets of data about the course requirements for responses to classmates. As described in Chapter 3, the weeks required and number of responses required for each of those weeks was converted to the response options given to the students in the questionnaire. Again, these categories were More than once a day, Every day, A few days a week, Once a week, Once a month, Twice a month, Once a semester, Twice a semester, As necessary, and Not at all. Both sets of data were compared to the expectation data collected with the questionnaire.

The first data set used to determine if expectations were met by the course assumed that students were completing all response posts in one day. The second set assumed that students



were only completing one classmate response a day (see Table 4.1). This calculation was done because they represent the two possible extremes of student participation for this type of assignment. For example, ENG111 8-week courses required an average of 2.88 responses during eight of the eight weeks. This data was reported as “Once a week” because responding once during the week approximately every week would result in responding to classmates just once a week. This data was also reported as “A few days a week” because two to three responses would result in two to three posts a week.

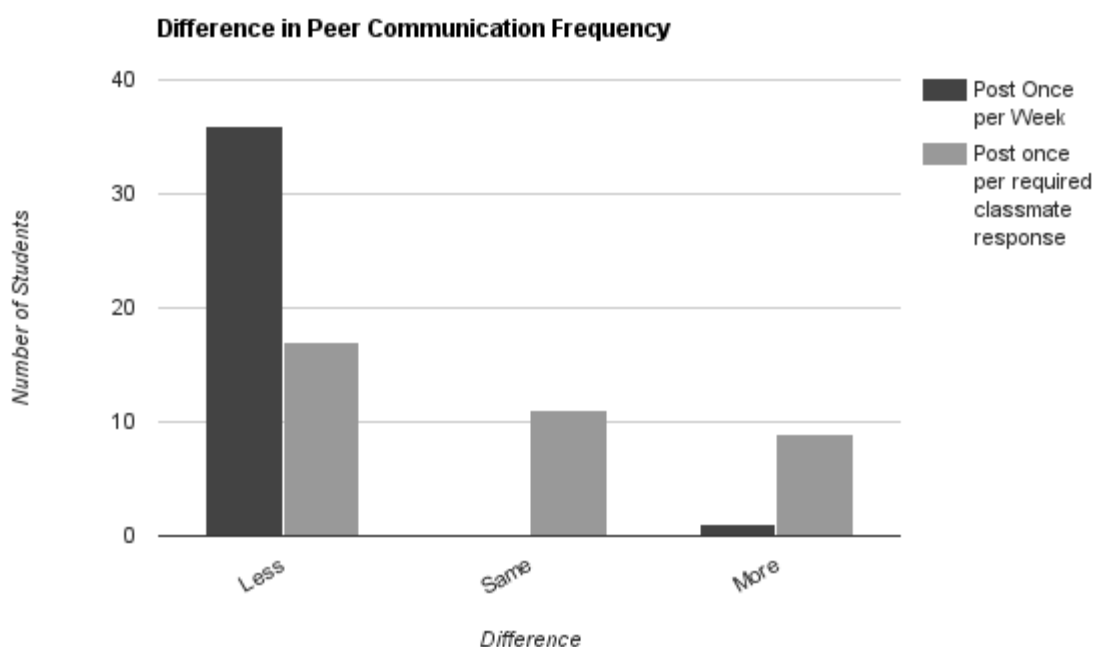
Table 4.1

*Required Response Frequency*

Course	Posting Weekly	Posting Separate Days
ENG111 8-week	Once a week	Few days a week
ENG111 12-week	Twice a month	Once a week
ENG111 16-week	Twice a month	Few days a week
ENG112 8-week	Twice a month	Once a week
ENG112 12-week	Once a month	Twice a month
ENG112 16-week	Once a month	Once a week

This data was then compared to the student expectations of peer communication frequency (see *Figure 4.5*). It was found, when looking for changes of frequency between what was expected by the student and what was expected by the course when posting just once weekly, that 97.3% of students were required to post less frequently than expected and 2.7% of students were required to post more frequently than expected. The students who responded “As necessary” for the expectations were not included as any requirement would have met this

expectation. When considering whether or not student expectations were met by the course requirements if students posted each required classmate response on separate days, most students (46%) were still required to respond less frequently than they were expected. This way of posting responses also resulted in 29.7% of students who were required to post the same frequency they expected and 24.3% of students were required to post more frequently than they expected. So, overall, between 70.3% and 100% of students did not have their expectations met by the course requirements, and the majority of students (between 46 and 97.3%) were required to communicate less frequently.

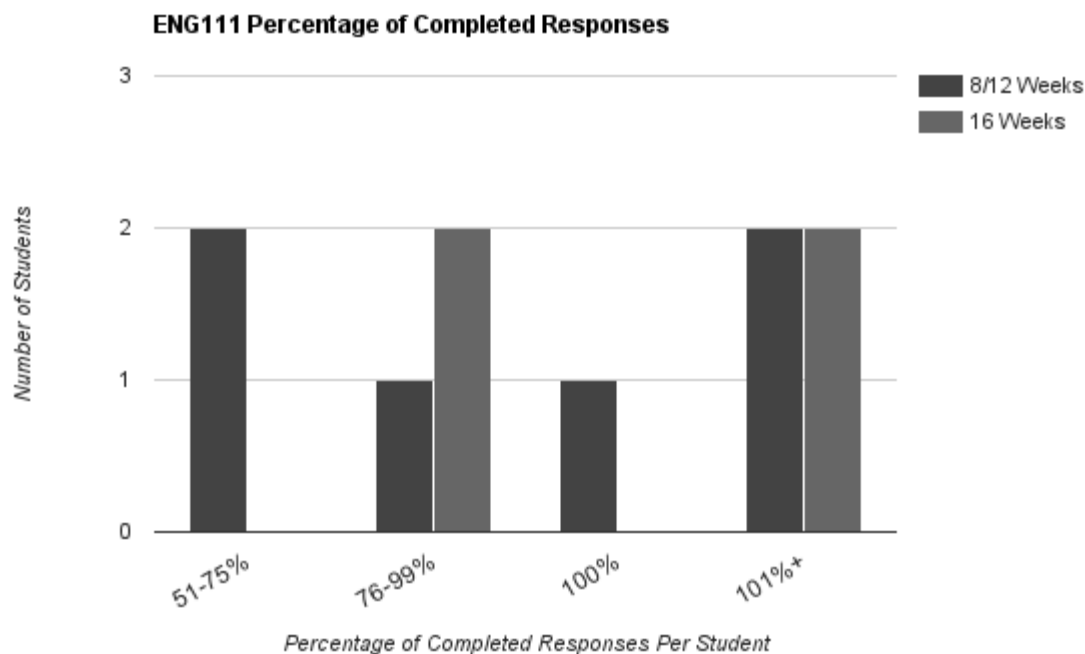


*Figure 4.5.* Difference in Peer Communication Frequency. This graph illustrates the differences between course expected frequency when students elect to post once per week versus posting each required response on a different day.

This result is important because the literature suggests that unmet student expectations may decrease retention (Herbert, 2006; Pleitz, MacDougall, Terry, Buckley & Campbell, 2015);

however, it has also been suggested (Pleitz, et al., 2015) that these discrepancies do not impact retention when they are academic in nature. A course requiring less work might retain students, but a course with less student connections (Morris & Finnegan, 2005; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 2003) might turn students away. These results might instead suggest that social expectations are not being met. Students may want to communicate more frequently than the number of opportunities offered/required by the course.

**4.2.2.2 Course Expectations and Success.** While the frequency of the required responses differed based on the length of the course, the courses did require around the same number of responses. The shortened versions of ENG111 required a total of 23 responses to classmates throughout the course. There were six students enrolled in ENG111 shortened courses that agreed to have their participation tracked. Of those six, two students (33.33%) completed 50-75% of the required responses, two students (33.33%) completed 76-100% of the required responses, and two students (33.33%) completed more than 100% of the required responses. There were four participants enrolled in a 16-week course and a total of 24 required responses to classmates. Of those four, two students (50%) completed 75-100% of the required responses and two students (50%) completed more than 100% of the required responses (see *Figure 4.6*).



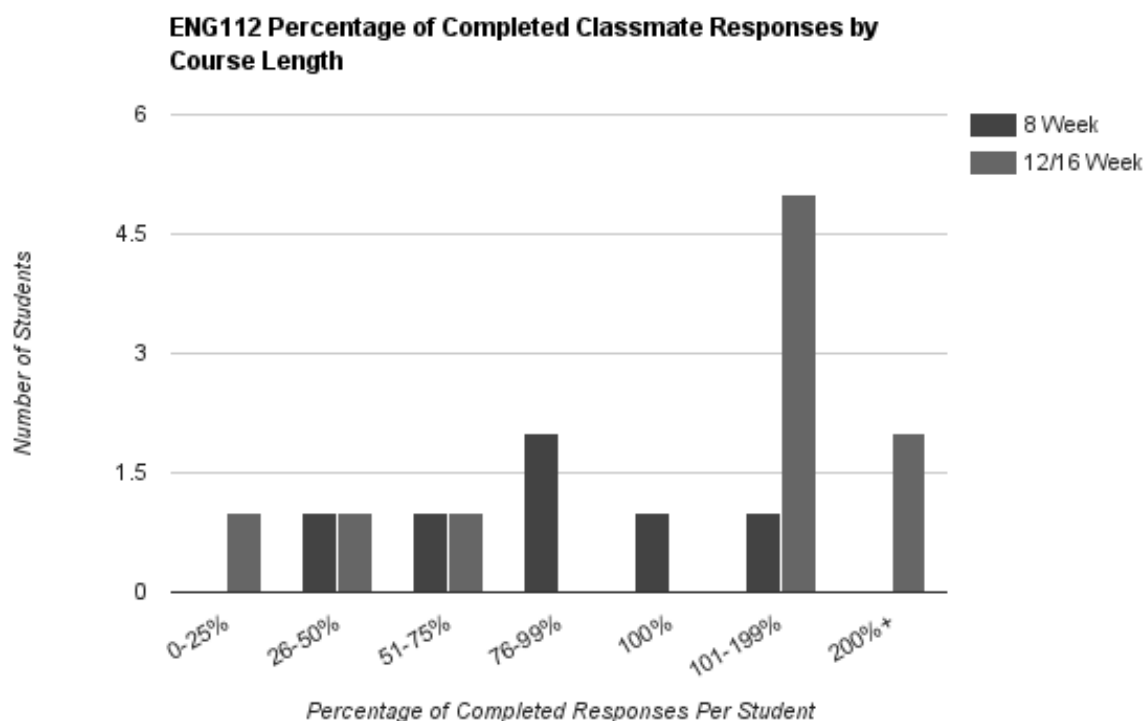
*Figure 4.6. ENG111 Percentage of Completed Responses.* This graph illustrates the percentage of required responses completed by students enrolled in an ENG111 course.

For the ENG111 courses, most students completed at least 75% of the required responses to classmates. To determine whether or not course length impacted the completion rate, a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>5</sup> was run and the result was not statistically significant ( $p=.238$ ), so there was no relationship between course length and response completion for ENG111.

The 12- and 16-week ENG112 courses required seven responses, but also required "active participation" in-group discussion for the group project. There were weeks in all course lengths where there were no required responses. For the 8-week courses, there were nine required responses but no "active participation" requirement for the group project. There were 10 students who were enrolled and tracked in a 12- or 16-week ENG112 course. Of those 10, one student

<sup>5</sup> This test was selected because it tests for independence between two non-normally distributed variables.

(10%) completed less than 25% of the responses, one student (10%) completed between 26 and 50% of the responses, one student (10%) completed between 51 and 75% of the responses, five students (50%) completed 101-200% of the responses, and two students (20%) completed more than 200% of the responses. There were six students enrolled in an 8-week ENG112 course. Of those six students, one student (16.6%) completed 26-50% of the responses, one student (16.6%) completed 51-75% of the required responses, three students (50%) completed 76-100% of the responses, and one student (16.6%) completed 101-200% of the responses (see *Figure 4.7*). Unfortunately, I only requested access to students' participation and final grades, so whether or not full credit was received by those students who posted two to three times during the group work cannot be considered.



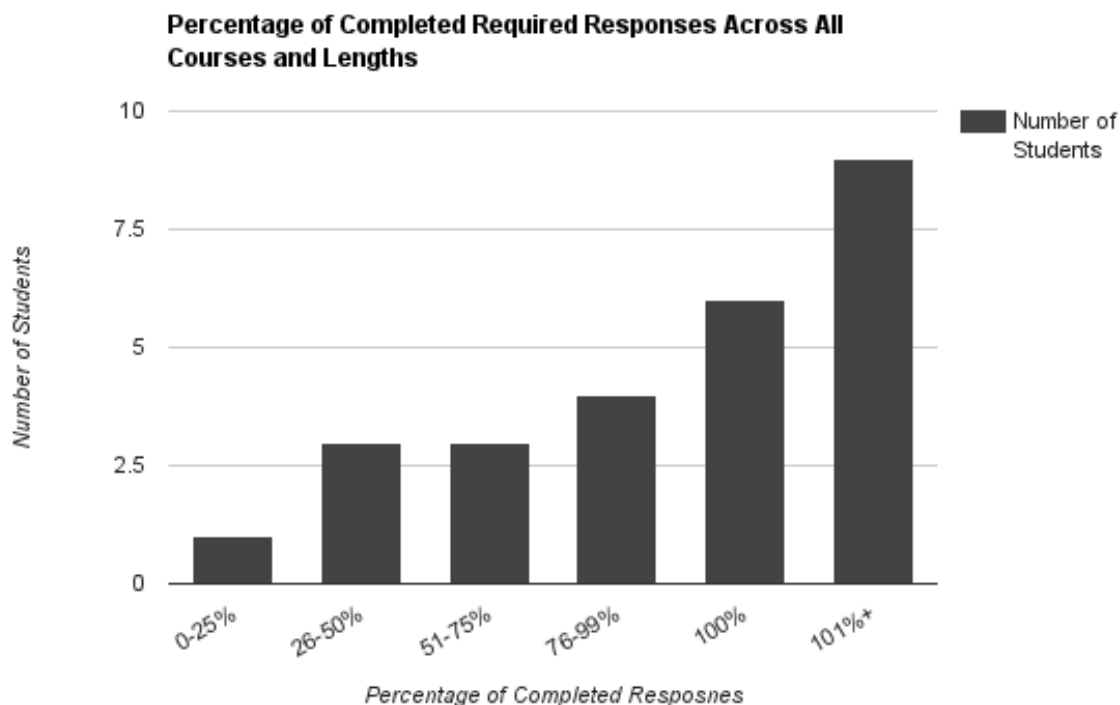
*Figure 4.7.* ENG112 Percentage of Completed Required Responses by Course Length. This graph illustrates how many students completed certain percentages of the required classmates responses in ENG112 by course length.

In order to test for a relationship between course length and completion rate in the ENG112 courses, a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>6</sup> was run. The result was not significant ( $p=.668$ ), so there was no relationship between course length and completion rate for the ENG112 courses either.

Across all ENG112 course lengths, six students (38%) did not complete the required number of responses. In the 12- and 16-week courses, of the students who completed 101-199% of responses, four considered an additional two to three responses to be active participation and one student considered five responses to be active participation. Of those who completed more than 200% of the responses, all three seemed to consider seven to 10 responses to be active participation. More than half of all students in ENG112 did complete all of the required responses. Interestingly, half of the students who were graded for "active participation" considered two to three responses to be adequate, and it is necessary to consider whether or not it is related to the fact that two to three responses are often the required number of responses when part of an assignment. In order to get an idea of how this data looks across all courses and lengths, I recalculated the numbers for the 12- and 16-week ENG112 courses with 10 being the required number of responses. These results were calculated in order to combine them with the results from ENG111 and can be seen in *Figure 4.8*.

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<sup>6</sup> This test was used because the data was not normally distributed and the Chi-Square test resulted in more than 5% of empty cells.



*Figure 4.8.* Percentage of Completed Required Responses Across All Courses and Lengths. This graph illustrates the number of students who completed certain percentages of the required responses in Spring 2016.

*Figure 4.8* shows that the majority of students completed most if not all of the required responses to classmates across all courses and course lengths. Interestingly, a large number, nine students (35%), went above and beyond the requirements in responding to the posts of others. These students, however, were often those that were posting more than one sentence and went back to respond to posts on their own threads.

When comparing the percentage of completed classmate responses to how frequently students expected to communicate with peers, a Fisher's Exact Test shows no statistical significance ( $p=.545$ ). So there was no relationship between how often students expected to communicate with peers and how many required responses they completed. This result is

important because it suggests that how frequently a student expected to communicate with peers may not impact whether or not they complete the work when expectations are or are not met. However, a large number of students expected to communicate pretty frequently and a large number went above and beyond the requirements. This finding may suggest that students want more peer interaction opportunities than the courses are providing. Studying this idea at multiple institutions (with varying student response requirements) might be an interesting area of future study.

**4.2.2.3 Outliers.** There were three students considered “outliers” when collecting the expectation data for peer communication frequency. One of those students responded with “Once a month” and was unsuccessful. This result will be discussed later in this section. Another student responded with “Once a semester,” but only completed the questionnaire, so there is no way to compare whether or not these expectations were met. The third student responded with “Not at all.” This student did not agree to be tracked, but was interviewed. This student reported in the interview that they communicated with peers a few days a week. This student also completed 90% of the responses and finished the course with a *B*, so it is clear that expectations did not impact this student’s performance in the course.

The students that were not successful in the course can be considered outliers in this study. When looking at the five unsuccessful students and what their expectations were and whether or not they were met, there was only once instance in which student expectations were met by course (not including those that were expecting to post “As necessary”). This student (NAS1618) had expectations met by the number of required responses in the course if they posted all the required posts for a week on a single day, but was required to post more if they posted to individual students on different days. The remaining students did not have expectations



met by the course and the course required fewer responses than expected except for those who simply said they expected to complete them when necessary (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

*Outliers: Meeting Peer Communication Frequency Expectations with the Average Course Required Response Frequency*

Student Code	Expectation	Met by Requirements	Percentage Completed
NAS1614 <sup>7</sup>	Necessary	Once a month Once a week	Not Tracked
NAS1617	Few days a week	No-Once a month Once a week	50%
NAS1618	Once a month	Yes-Once a month No-Once a week	30%
NAS1627	Few days a week	No-Once a month No-Twice a month	14%
NAS1636	Necessary	Twice a month Once a week	33%

Only one student who stated they expected to communicate with peers when necessary was tracked. This student did not, in fact, post when necessary because this student (NAS1636) only completed 33% of the required responses. Only one unsuccessful student completed half of the required responses to classmates (NAS1617). This suggests that, even though requirements were either met or less than expected, unsuccessful students were still not completing the responses. This finding might indicate that even if students were expecting fewer responses they still may not have completed them. However, completing the student responses does not appear to be a significant factor in passing the course. There were three passing students who completed less than 75% of the required classmates responses (see Table 4.3)

<sup>7</sup> Please see Appendix G for an explanation and list of student codes.

Table 4.3

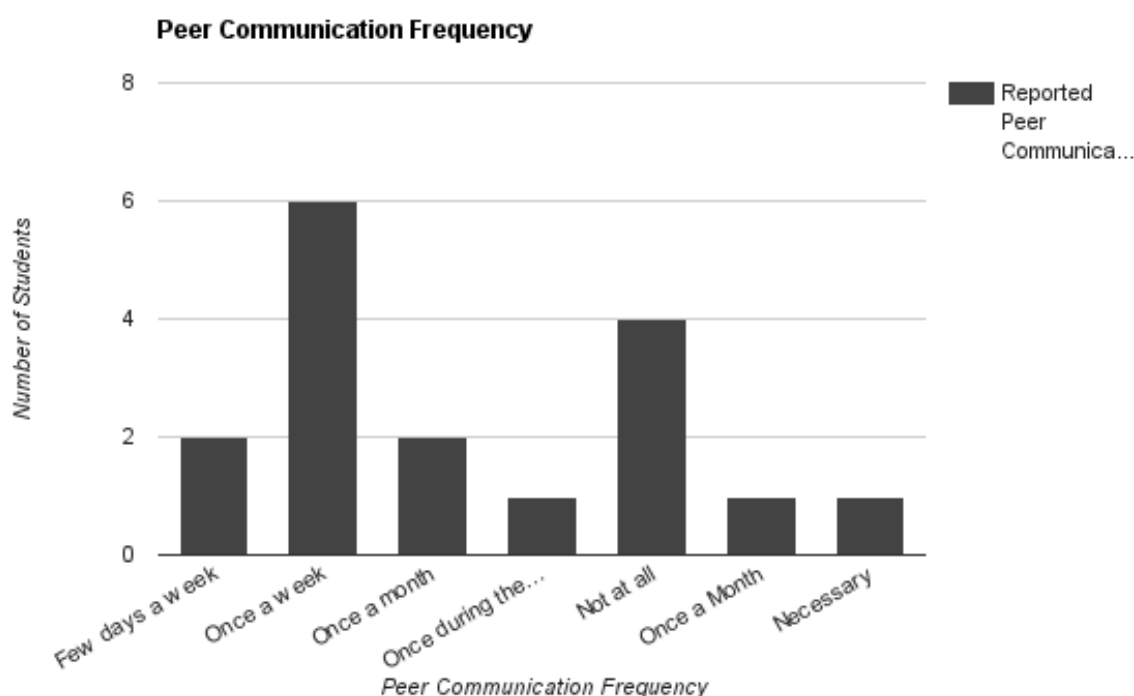
*Outliers: Passing students who completed less than 75% of required classmate responses*

Student Code	Expected	Course Required	Percentage Completed	Final Grade
NAS1603	Few days a week	Once a week Few days a week	74%	A
NAS1605	Once a week	Once a week Few days a week	52%	B
NAS1631	Few days a week	Twice a month Once a week	67%	A

This result suggests that though students are not communicating as much as expected, some are also not participating as much as expected. For some, this finding does not significantly impact their final grade. Overall, the outliers in the peer communication data from the questionnaire and the course requirements suggest that student expectations were not met, but this lack of met expectations did not impact success in the course. However, it also suggests that students may want more interaction than they are required to complete for the course. As noted earlier, this lack of interaction, if consider to be a social interaction by the students, may negatively impact retention. All but one of the unsuccessful students were required to participate less frequently and did participate less frequently than expected. While five students is too small of a sample to draw any conclusions, it would be an interesting area for further research.

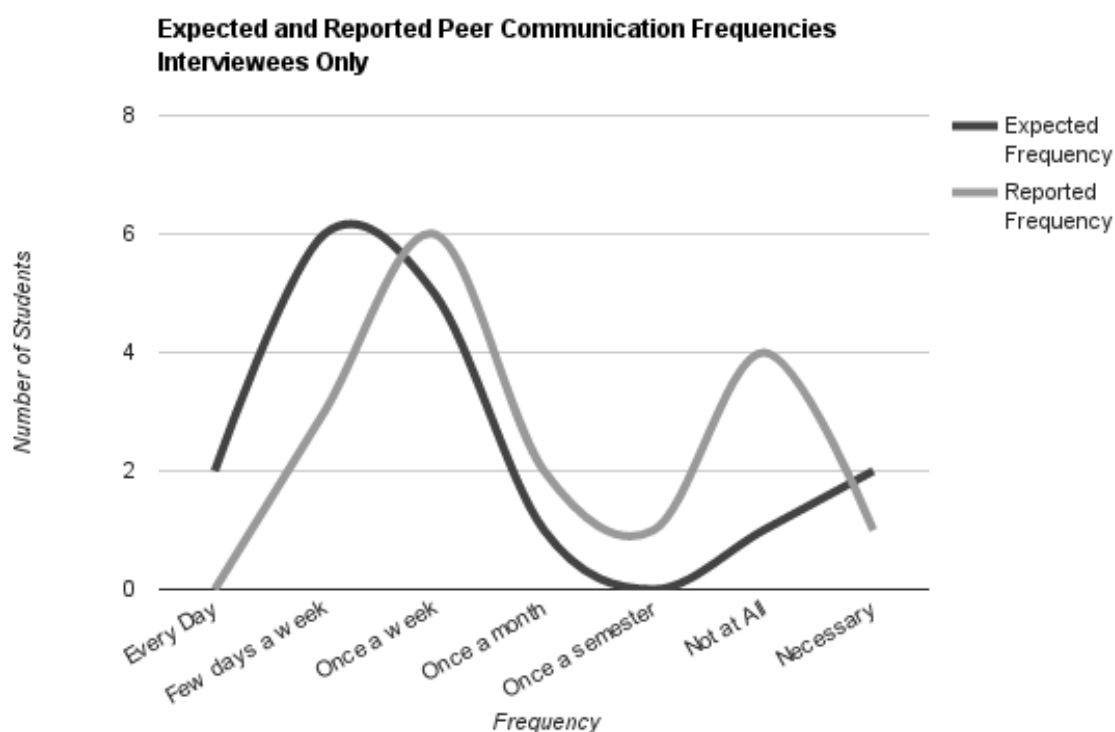
**4.2.2.4 Student Reported Peer Communication Frequency.** As discussed earlier, while some students might complete these responses over the course of the week, others might complete them in one day. This is an important consideration because those responses are more likely to reflect the range of student response preferences. Because fewer students completed the interview than the questionnaire, the interview question responses are being reported first in order to consider overall similarities or differences between this data and the expected frequency.

Then, the interview responses are specifically compared with the individual student responses from the questionnaire. In the interview, two students (12%) said they communicated with classmates a few days a week, six students (35%) said they communicated with classmates once a week, three students (17.5%) said they communicated once a month, one student (6%) said they communicated once during the semester, four students (23.5%) said they did not communicate with classmates at all, and one student (6%) indicated only responding when necessary (see *Figure 4.9*).



*Figure 4.9.* Reported Peer Communication Frequency. This graph illustrates how often interviewees said they communicated with peers during the semester.

This finding represents a shift between expectations and perceptions, where the majority of students expected to communicate a few days a week and a very small percentage indicated that they did not expect to respond to any classmates at all (see *Figure 4.10*).



*Figure 4.10.* Expected and Reported Peer Communication Frequencies Interviewees Only. This graph illustrates the differences between the Expected Peer Communication Frequency reported and the Reported Peer Communication Frequency identified by the interviewees.

Because the data is ordinal and the responses are to the same question at different times, the data was converted to numerical data and a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test<sup>8</sup> was run. The results ( $Z=-2.65$ ;  $p=.008$ ) showed a statistically significant change in student responses to questions of peer communication frequency. Therefore, the interviewed students reported communicating with peers less than they expected to before the semester started. This finding would suggest that though student expectations were not met, the reality was less work than expected. This result suggests that students' perceptions of how frequently they communicate with peers aligns with course requirements discussed earlier. As discussed in Chapter 2, students' perceptions are

<sup>8</sup> This test is used for data that is not normally distributed and variables that are at least ordinal. It tests for changes between pre and post-test type data.

important because they can have a direct impact on motivation (Campbell & Mislevy, 2012).

These results support the previous suggestion that students may not be interacting socially with their classmates as they were expecting. This lack of interaction might also impact retention because community building is important to both community college students and online courses (Arbuagh, 2010; Bernard et al., 2009; Coppola, 2005; Grady & Davis, 2005; Hunter, 2011; Kastman Breuch, 2005; Komarraju, et al., 2010; Rayle & Chung, 2007; Schlossberg, 1989). These results will be discussed in light of student definitions of difficulty on page 165 of Chapter 5 as well.

**4.2.2.5 Student Reported Frequency and Success.** In the previous section, it was determined that student expectations were not met by the course requirements or student perspectives of how frequently they communicated with peers. Interestingly, though, most students expected to communicate more frequently than they reported at the end of the semester. In regard to student reported peer communication frequency, 71% of students interviewed were successful and did not have their expectations met while 12% were successful and did have their expectations met, and 17% of students were unsuccessful and did not have their expectations met. No students were unsuccessful and had their expectations met (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4

*Meeting Reported Peer Communication Expectations and Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Less	8	1
Same	2	0
More	4	2

In order to see if these results impacted success statistically, a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test was run. As discussed in Chapter 3, this test was used because it tests for association between a nominal independent variable and a nominal dependent variable by looking at the average mode. This test is useful when the data are not normally distributed (like in this study). It was found that there was no statistical significance to a predictive relationship between peer communication frequency expectations being unmet and success ( $p=.309$ ). While it is important to keep in mind that the sample size is small, unmet expectations did not seem to result in poor performance by the students when all calculations and representations are considered. This result may suggest that required peer interaction is viewed as “academic” instead of “social” as discussed earlier. It is also possible that some view it as purely academic and some as both “academic” and “social.”

**4.2.2.6 Outliers.** When looking at just the unsuccessful students, there is again one student who had expectations met (NAS1618). This student is the same student who had expectations met by the course requirements. Notably, this student also had the lowest expectations of all five unsuccessful students (though two of them indicated only communicating when necessary). There were only three students out of the five who completed the interview. The other two (NAS1614/NAS1627) both reported not communicating with classmates at all. This result is interesting because not only does it suggest that they were communicating less than expected, but also because the responses collected from Blackboard suggest otherwise. While the tracked students may not have been communicating as frequently as intended, they did post responses. This result might suggest that these students were not putting in the effort so they were not counting these posts as “real” communication. It also might suggest that they were

disappointed by their performance and so they selected that they did not communicate with classmates (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5

*Outliers: Peer Communication Frequency Expectations, Requirements, Reports, and Completes*

Student Code	Expectation	Requirement	Reported	Percent Complete
NAS1614	Necessary	Once a month Once a week	No-Not at all	Not Tracked
NAs1617	Few days a week	No-Once a month Once a week	Not interviewed	71%
NAS1618	Once a month	Yes-Once a month No-Once a week	Yes-Once a month	43%
NAS1627	Few days a week	No-Once a month No-Twice a month	No-Not at all.	14%
NAS1636	Necessary	Twice a month Once a week	Not interviewed	33%

Regardless, there were two students not communicating as frequently as expected who were not successful. When considering the students who completed less than 75% of the required responses, only two completed an interview. One had expectations met and the other did not, but reported communicating less than expected (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6

*Outliers: Completed <75% of the Required Responses*

Student	Expectations	Requirements	Percent Complete	Final Grade	Reported
NAS1603	Few days a week	Once a week Few days a week	74%	A	Not interviewed
NAS1605	Once a week	Once a week Few days a week	52%	B	Once a week
NAS1631	Few days a week	Twice a month Once a week	67%	A	Once a week

Interestingly, the student who completed approximately half of the responses, expected and reported communicating once a week, and also had the expectation met if the student posted responses just once weekly. This student completed the course with a lower grade than the student who did not have expectations met, but those expectations were higher, meaning less work was required.

#### 4.2.3 Peer Communication Discussion

The data suggests that most student expectations of peer communication are not being met by the course requirements and that this unmet expectation is not impacting final grades. This lack of impact may be because student completion of these course requirements does not seem to have a huge impact on final grades. If a student can complete approximately half of the responses and still receive a *B*, then maybe not enough significance is placed on student communication in the responses. While students seem to expect more interaction with students than they are being required to complete, it may be that students would prefer social to academic interactions with classmates. When considering reported peer communication frequency, it seems that being required to complete fewer responses than expected may positively impact



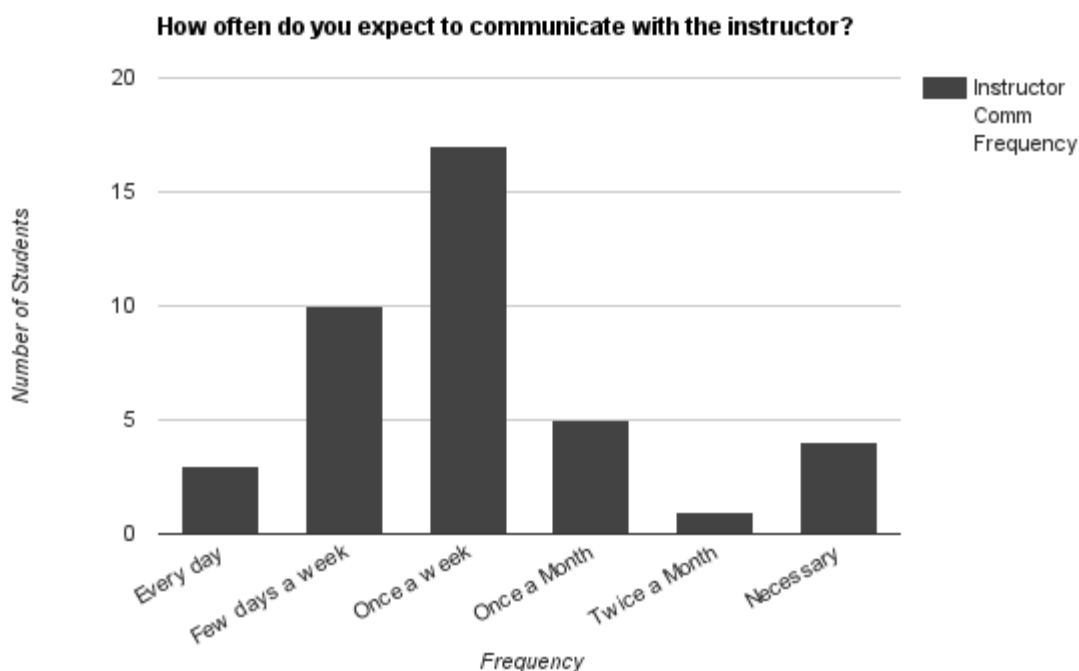
success. This result might suggest that students primarily view these responses as academic. This finding presents the same problem many online community scholars have already pointed out: do required responses really create a sense of community? If not, how do we create a community in an online setting? For this study, it is not possible to really parse out social vs. academic interactions, though it is possible that students saw the responses as a bit of both. This difference is something that would need to be addressed in additional research focusing primarily on peer communication.

### **4.3 Instructor Communication**

#### **4.3.1 Expectations**

The second questionnaire item regarding communication expectations was question seven, which was “How often do you expect to communicate via email or course tools with your instructor?” (see *Figure 4.11*). For this question, 75% of students indicated that they expected to communicate with their instructor at least once a week, with the majority of those students indicating expecting to communicate with the instructor once a week. Fewer students, 12.5% (five students), indicated that they expected to communicate with the instructor once a month and 12.5% (five students) selected “Other.” Three of those students indicated that they would communicate as needed/assigned, one indicated the expectation to communicate twice a month, and the final student indicated that they could not answer the question because they were unsure of the struggles that would arise. This student’s response was placed under the category of “necessary” it appeared that the student would communicate with the instructor only when it was necessary (and it would only be necessary when this student struggled). This result suggests that the student might expect to only contact the instructor if they are having trouble. It is difficult to determine what level of struggle would prompt contact though. Struggling could mean anything

from failing the course to needing clarification on feedback. It also suggests that the student is not considering assignment feedback or announcements to be communication and is not expecting the instructor to participate in the discussion boards.



*Figure 4.11.* How often do you expect to communicate with the instructor? This graph illustrates how frequently students expected to communicate with the instructor of the course.

Because course length may also impact instructor communication, the data was divided by course length. For the 8-week courses, 6% (one student) expected to communicate with the instructor every day, 31% (five students) expected to communicate with the instructor a few days a week, 38% (six students) expected to communicate with the instructor once a week, 6% (one student) expected to communicate with the instructor once a month, 6% (one student) selected “other” and indicated that they expected to communicate with the instructor twice a month, and 12% (two students) selected “other” and indicated that they expected to communicate only when necessary. One student (NAS1629) selected “Other” and indicated not knowing how to answer

the question because they were unable to tell how much they would struggle. As noted previously, this student's response was included in the "necessary" category.

For the 12-week courses, 40% (two students) expected to communicate a few days a week, and 20% (one student) each expected to communicate once a week, once a month and when necessary. Again, the 12-week students were not exactly representative of the overall population because there were only five respondents in the 12-week courses. The results for the 8-week and 16-week courses broke down in a similar way in that more students expected to communicate with the instructor at least once a week, if not more. Where these results differ is in the finer details. A larger percentage of 16-week students expected to communicate once a week than the 8-week students, and a larger number of 8-week students expected to communicate a few days a week. This result may be because of the fast pace of the 8-week course. Students may expect more feedback, more announcements, and more questions to arise. See *Figure 4.12* for comparison.

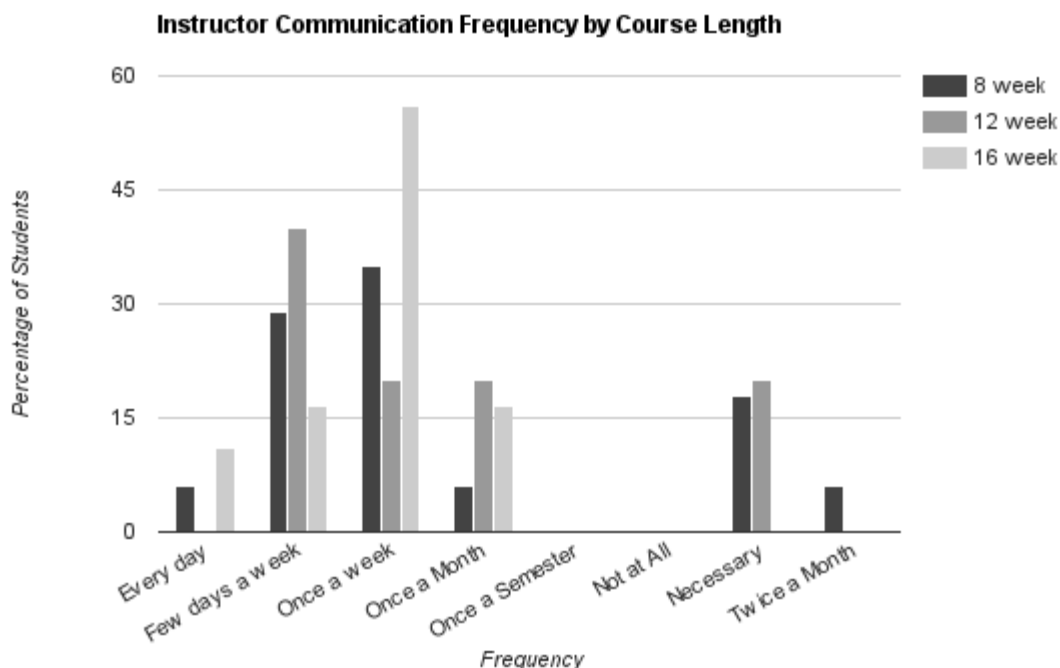


Figure 4.12. Instructor Communication Frequency by Course Length. This graph illustrates how often students expected to communicate with the course instructor by the length of the course.

To test this idea statistically, a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>9</sup> was calculated. This test was run to determine if course length was related to the expected instructor communication frequency. The result was not statistically significant ( $p=.484$ ); therefore, course length did not impact the expected instructor communication frequency.

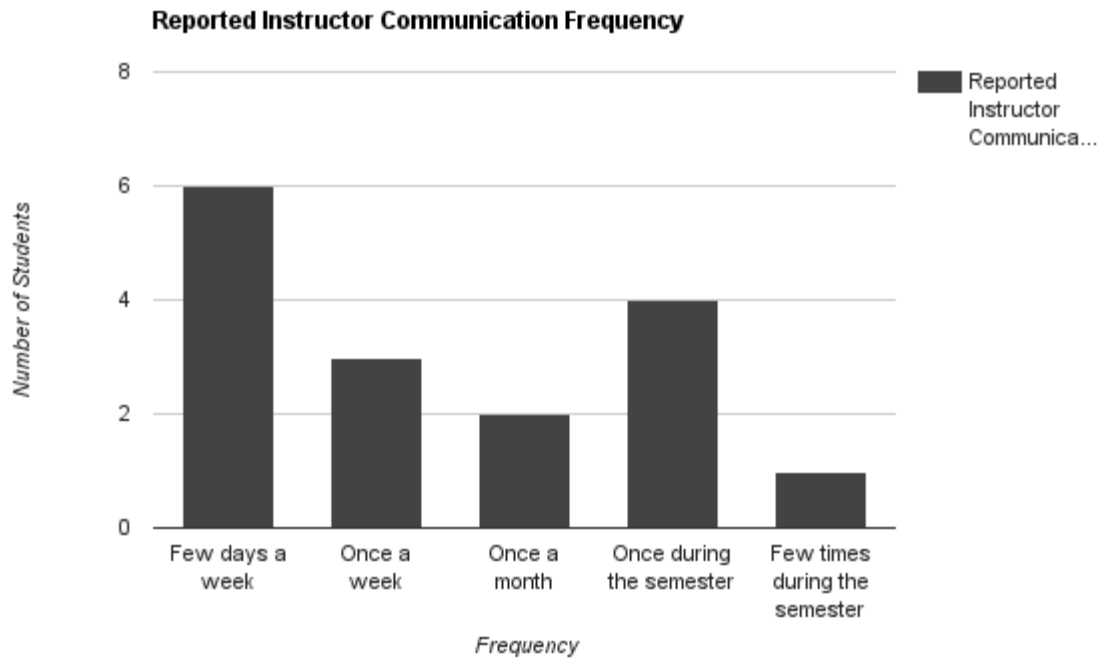
Overall, it appears that students expect to communicate more frequently with peers than with the instructor of their course. As mentioned above, this result might be due to the fact that discussion boards are built into all learning management systems today and so communicating with classmates is expected. It might suggest a student preference for peer communication; it also might suggest that students do not expect communication, even in the form of feedback,

<sup>9</sup> This test was run because it is intended to determine whether or not two variables are independent of each other. It is used in place of the Chi-Square test when the data is not normally distributed, the sample size is small and the Chi-Square test results in more than 5% of the cells being empty.

with instructors unless they need help in some way because they expect the course to be self-taught. This finding might also suggest that students are not likely to respond to instructor participation in the discussion board. The self selection of “Other” and typing of “only when necessary” was an interesting result as it seems that these students only expect to communicate with peers and instructors when it is assigned or when they need help. This result may also support the idea that required response is necessary to helping to build community, though that community may not be perfect.

#### **4.3.2 Meeting Expectations and Success**

**4.3.2.1 Reported Instructor Communication Frequency.** The final data set collected in the communication section of the interview was about instructor communication during the semester. Of the 17 students interviewed, six students (35%) indicated that they communicated with the instructor a few days a week, three students (17.5%) indicated communicating once a week, three students (17.5%) indicated communicating once a month, four students (24%) indicated communicating once during the semester, and one student (6%) indicated communicating a few times during the semester (see *Figure 4.13*).



*Figure 4.13.* Reported Instructor Communication Frequency. This graph illustrates the reported frequency interviewees communicated with their instructors.

Instructor interaction is repeatedly a factor in student success in other studies (Herbert, 2006; Morris & Finnegan, 2009). Students perform better when they feel the faculty are engaged and interactive. When visually comparing the reported instructor frequency to the expected instructor communication frequency from the questionnaire, there is, interestingly, a shift in the reported frequency to greater frequency than the questionnaire report (see *Figure 4.14*).

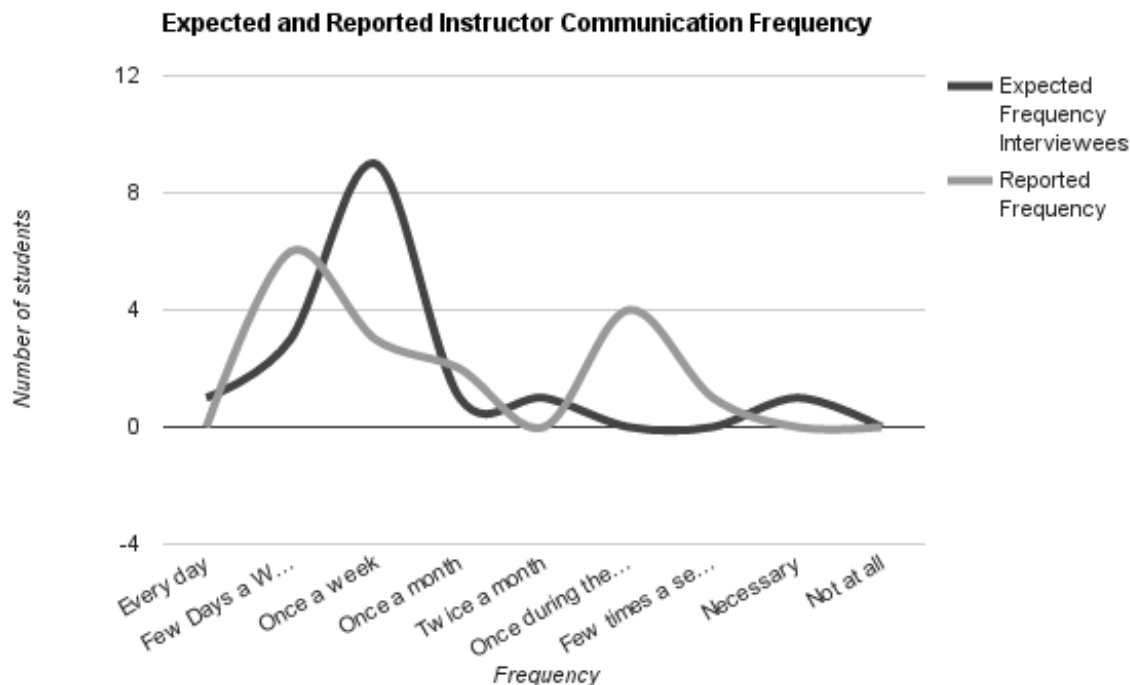


Figure 4.14. Expected and Reported Instructor Communication Frequency. This graph illustrates the changes in frequency between what students expected and what was reported in the interview.

However, when using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test<sup>10</sup>, the result is not statistically significant ( $Z=-1.23$ ;  $p=.203$ ). This result indicates that there was no statistically significant change between how often individual students expected to communicate with the instructor and how often they reported communicating with the instructor. This finding is important because it suggests that expectations were met overall.

Unfortunately, there was no real way to track communication with the instructor in Blackboard as a TA. Between not being able to track emails and the fact that I received permission from the instructors to be added to their courses with the promise that I would not be collecting data about their own work in the course, it was not feasible. So this analysis will only

<sup>10</sup> This test is used for this data because its purpose is to test for changes between the pre and post-test results of data that is not normally distributed with a small sample size.

discuss whether or not student reported frequencies met the expectations established by the analysis of the questionnaire responses.

When comparing the differences between the expected and reported frequency of instructor communication to student success, 41% of the students interviewed were successful and did not have expectations met, 41% were successful and did have expectations met, and 18% were unsuccessful and did not have expectations met (see Table 4.7).

Table 4.7

*Differences between Expected and Reported Instructor Communication Compared to Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Less	5	2
Same	6	0
More	2	1

In order to test the statistical significance of a relationship between met/unmet expectations and success, a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test<sup>11</sup> was run. The results ( $p=.308$ ) were not statistically significant. This means that whether or not student expectations of instructor communication frequency were met did not impact student success. Again, it is important to consider that the sample size was small and that statistical significance means that the sample is representative of the population.

<sup>11</sup> This used because it tests to see whether or not a multinomial independent variable can predict a dependent variable. It's specifically intended for data that is not normally distributed and small sample sizes.



### 4.3.3 Outliers

Out of the three unsuccessful students interviewed, two reported significantly less instructor communication frequency than expected and one reported more (see Table 4.8). This result suggests that at least two of the unsuccessful students (NAS1618/NAS1627) were either not contacting the instructor to ask for help or did not consider announcements and feedback to be communication. It was suggested earlier in this section that students might consider instructor communication to happen only when the student asks for help, and these results may support this idea.

Table 4.8

*Outliers: Unsuccessful Students' Expected and Reported Instructor Communication Frequency*

Student Code	Expected	Reported
NAS1614	Once a week	A few days a week
NAS1617	Once a week	Not interviewed
NAS1618	Once a week	Once during the semester
NAS1627	A few days a week	Once during the semester
NAS1636	Necessary	Not interviewed

The outliers in expectations of instructor communication frequency were not the same students who were outliers in their expectations of peer communication frequency. Only one of the two students was interviewed (NAS1630) and this student reported communicating more frequently than expected and earned an *A* in the course (see Table 4.9).

Table 4.9

*Outliers: Expected Instructor Communication Frequency*

Student Code	Expected	Reported	Final Grade
NAS1630	Twice a month	Few days a week	A
NAS1629	Unsure of struggle	Not interviewed	Not tracked

This result may, again, suggest either struggle or that this student (NAS1630) considered other forms of communication when answering the questions.

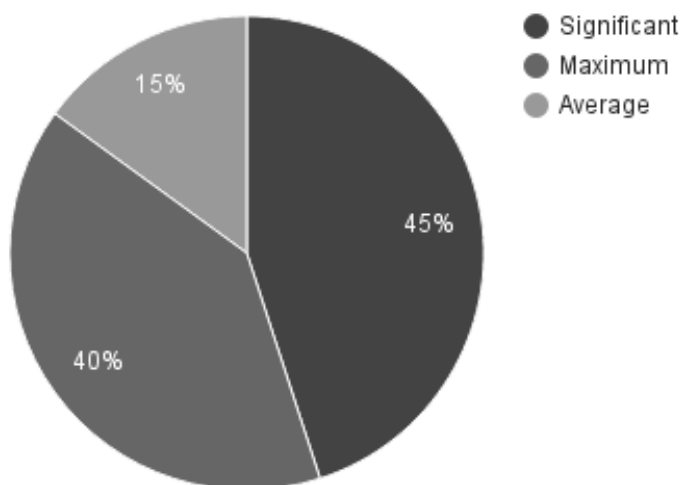
#### **4.3.4 Instructor Communication Frequency Discussion**

Overall, the results of the instructor communication frequency section suggest that unmet expectations do not decrease student retention. However, because the sample size was small, the predictive statistics may not be accurate. Additionally, none of the unsuccessful students had their expectations met. The real issue in regard to instructor communication is whether or not students consider instructor feedback or discussion posts as communication or if they only consider student initiated contact. The questions did try to specify, but the prompt “asking questions, responding to questions, etc.” may need more elaboration in future research.

### **4.4 Communication Effort**

The final communication item in the questionnaire, question eight, asked, “How much effort do you expect to put into these communications?” For this question, 85% answered with significant effort or maximum effort (45 and 40% respectively), and only 15% (six students) responded with “Average Effort” (see *Figure 4.15*).

**How much effort do you expect to put into communication?**



*Figure 4.15.* How much effort do you expect to put into communication? This graph illustrates the amount of effort students expected to put into course communications.

These results suggest that regardless of how often students expect to communicate, they do expect to put effort into the work that communication takes. In order to determine whether or not there was a relationship between expected peer communication and expected communication effort, a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>12</sup> was again used, and resulted in no statistical significance relationship ( $p=.116$ ). Testing the relationship between expected instructor communication and expected communication effort using a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>13</sup> also resulted in no statistical significance ( $p=.899$ ). This result means that student expectations of communication frequency did not have a relationship with expected communication effort.

<sup>12</sup> This was used here because it tests for independence between two variables with data that is not normally distributed with a small sample size.

<sup>13</sup> This was used here because it tests for independence between two variables with data that is not normally distributed with a small sample size.

#### 4.4.1 Expectations and Success

While there was no way to truly test if expectations were met regarding student effort in communications in the course, it is possible to compare expected effort to final grades. When creating a cross-tabulated chart, most students clearly expected to put in significant to maximum effort regardless of whether or not they ended up being successful, and no students selected less than average effort (see Table 4.10).

Table 4.10

*Difference between Expected and Reported Communication Effort Compared to Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Maximum	9	2
Significant	10	2
Average	4	1

A Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test<sup>14</sup> was run to determine whether or not expected communication effort impacted success. The result ( $Z=0$ ) was not statistically significant. This result means that expected communication effort could not predict success in the course.

#### 4.4.2 Outliers

When considering the outliers, the unsuccessful students were overall in the majority as far as expected communication effort. The outliers in this section are those who expected to put in average effort. While one student was unsuccessful, three of the other students received *A*'s and one student received a *B*. Therefore, it does not appear that expected effort impacted final grades across the board.

<sup>14</sup> This test was appropriate because it determines whether or not a multinomial independent variable can predict a dependent variable for small samples without normal distribution.

#### **4.5 Communication Discussion**

Overall, the results are mixed. The expected peer communication frequencies were not met, as there was a statistically significant decline in the frequency reported at the end of the semester. Student peer communication expectations were also not met by the course requirements. It would also appear that overall instructor communication might have been more frequent, but the results are not significant statistically and do not reflect individual student changes in response. Most students expected to communicate once a week, which is not infrequent. Because frequent and meaningful instructor interaction is considered a motivator for retention (Herbert, 2006; Moore, et al., 2003; Morris & Finnegan, 2009), this result might suggest that the majority of students would be successful. When considering these results in light of the amount of effort that students expected to put into communication (85% expected to put in Maximum or Significant effort), the idea that required communication frequency being lower than expected might increase success is feasible and would be another area of further research.

## CHAPTER 5

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTICIPATION EXPECTATIONS AND SUCCESS

#### 5.1 Summary of Results

##### 5.1.1 Expectations

The questionnaire items regarding participation and coursework focused on asking students to determine how much work they expected to put into the course based on frequency of participation, time spent, difficulty and effort. These questions were asked because "Expectancy theory states that motivation is a function of the perceived probability that effort will result in effective performance, and that effective performance will result in desired outcomes" (Friedman & Mandel, 2011). If we understand the effort students expect to put forth on a variety of levels and how that relates to success, we may be able to determine how to help motivate students to succeed. This set of questions included some that focused on content expectations. Content expectations were included because learning content is considered part of the coursework. Overall, the responses to these questions reveal that the majority of students expected to spend four to six hours over three to five days a week, putting forth average effort to complete a somewhat difficult course. Students thought that the course, the instructor and personal student factors make a course difficult and they were expecting to learn to improve writing, learn about the subject of writing, and focus on self-improvement.

##### 5.1.2 Meeting Expectations

In order to determine if student expectations concerning the coursework were met, data was collected from Blackboard and the interview questions. The Blackboard data set includes the average number of log-ins per week and the average time logged in per week. The interview data set includes responses that consider how much time was spent on coursework, how difficult the

class was, and whether or not they learned what they expected to learn when they enrolled. This data was compared to how much participation, time, and effort students expected to put in, as well as whether or not they expected the course to be difficult, and what they expected to learn. Overall, the results were mixed. When compared to expectations of time spent, the results of the time logged in Blackboard, the number of logins to Blackboard and the assignments required by the course suggest that student expectations were not met. However, when students were asked directly, they reported in the interview that they spent the same amount of time they expected in the questionnaire. Expectations of difficulty and learning were also met overall. These three areas that resulted in met expectations used data from questions specifically addressed to the student and so reflect student perspective as opposed to being pulled from the Blackboard data collection. This finding is important because the study aimed to garner the student perspective.

### **5.1.3 Expectations and Success**

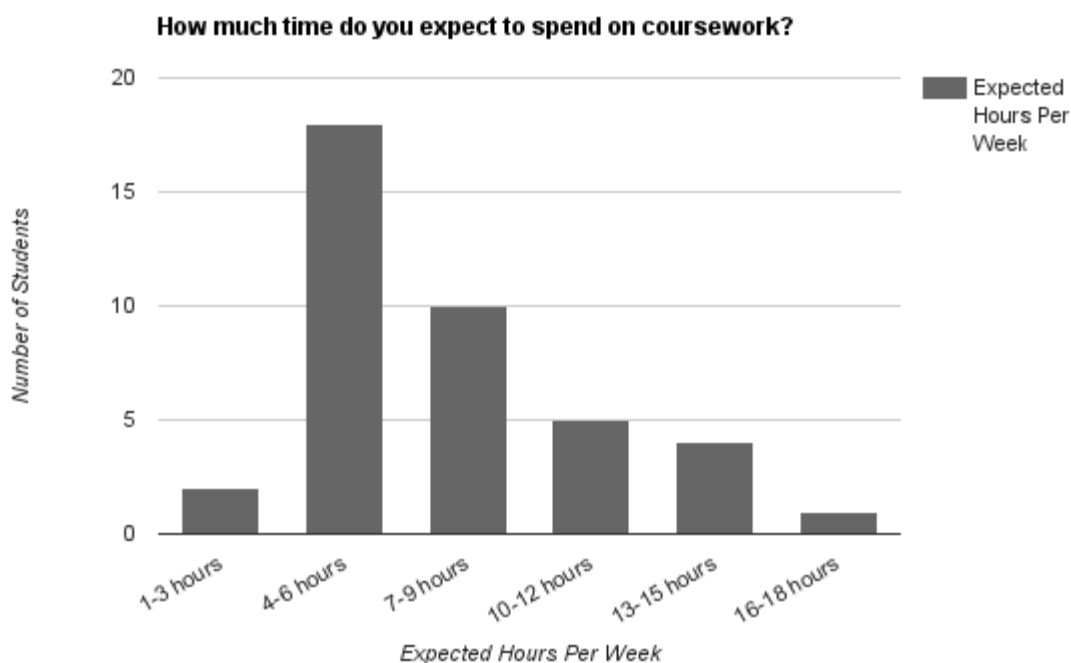
In order to compare participation expectations to success, the data concerning whether or not expectations were met was compared to both student assignment submission data and student final grades. Overall, the results suggest that there is no statistically significant connection between student participation expectations being met (or unmet) and student success in the course.

## **5.2 Time Spent**

### **5.2.1 Expectations**

The first time related item on the questionnaire asked, “How much time do you expect to spend on coursework?” As noted in Chapter 3, the hour range options provided were based on NOVA’s expectations for how much time students should be spending on coursework in an ELI course for a variety of course lengths. Overall, 45% expected to spend 4-6 hours per week, 25%

expected to spend 7-9 hours per week, 12.5% expected to spend 10-12 hours per week, 10% expected 13-15 hours per week, 5% expected 1-3 hours per week and 2.5% expected to spend 16-18 hours per week (see *Figure 5.1*).



*Figure 5.1.* How much time do you expect to spend on coursework? This chart illustrates how many hours per week students were expecting to spend on coursework.

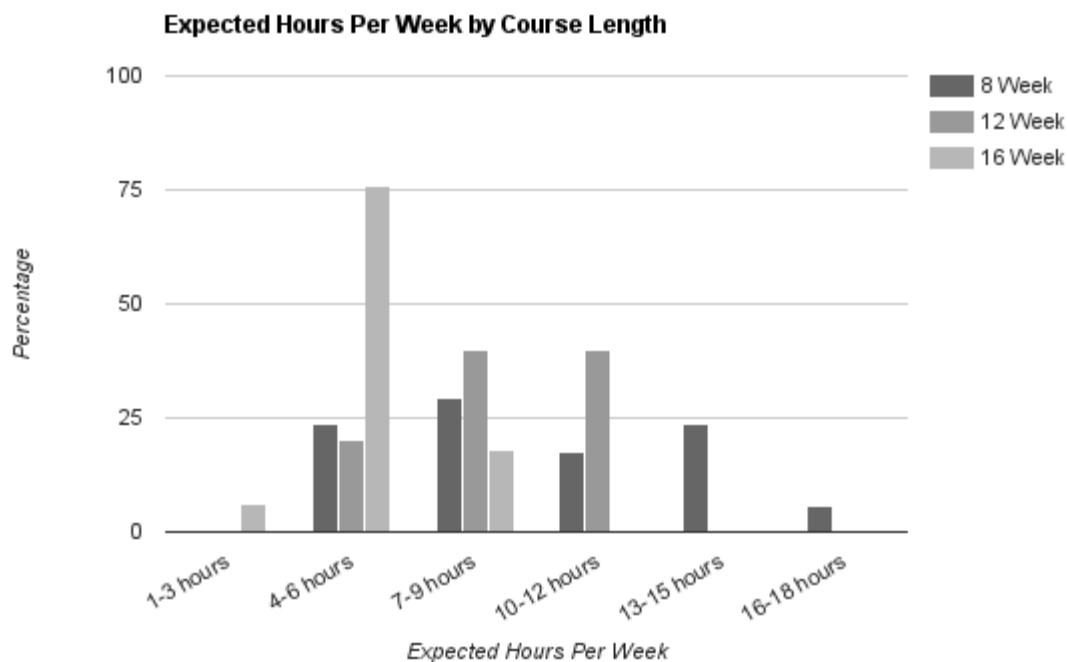
Again, because students who are enrolled in shorter courses should be spending more time on coursework, the data was divided by course length and analyzed. There were 17 students enrolled in 8-week courses. For this question, 23.5% (four students) expected 13-15 hours a week of coursework, 23.5% (four students) said 4-6 hours, 29.4% (five students) indicated 7-9 hours, 17.6% (three students) said 10-12, and 6% (one student) selected 16-18 hours. According to the documentation provided for instructors designing courses for ELI, 8-week courses should be designed so that students are spending approximately 12-18 hours a week. The majority of students (71%) taking the 8-week class did not expect to spend this much time on the course.



There were also 17 students who completed the questionnaire and were enrolled in a 16-week course. For the question regarding the amount of time they expected to spend on coursework, three students (18%) expected to spend 7-9 hours a week, 13 students (76%) expected to spend 4-6 hours a week, and one student (6%) expected to spend 1-3 hours a week. ELI expects 16-week courses to be designed so that students are spending 6-9 hours a week. Again, the majority (82%) of students enrolled in a 16-week course did not expect to spend this much time.

There were five students who took the survey and were enrolled in a 12-week course. When asked how many hours they expected to spend, one student (20%) expected to participate 4-6 hours a week, two students (40%) expected to participate 7-9 hours week, and two students (40%) expected to participate 10-12 hours a week. Finally, the 12-week courses should be designed so that students are spending 8-12 hours a week. In this case, the majority of students (80%) did expect to spend that amount of time in the course.

When comparing the number of hours students were expecting to participate in the course based on the length of the course they were enrolled in (see *Figure 5.2*), the data suggests course length does have a slight impact on the number of hours expected. For the 8-week courses and 12-week courses, the number of expected hours per week account for the highest number of expected hours spent. For the 16-week courses, the number of expected hours per week is lower than the shorter courses and account for the lowest number of expected hours spent.



*Figure 5.2.* Expected Hours per Week by Course Length. This chart illustrates how many hours student expected to spend per week based on the length of the course they were enrolled in.

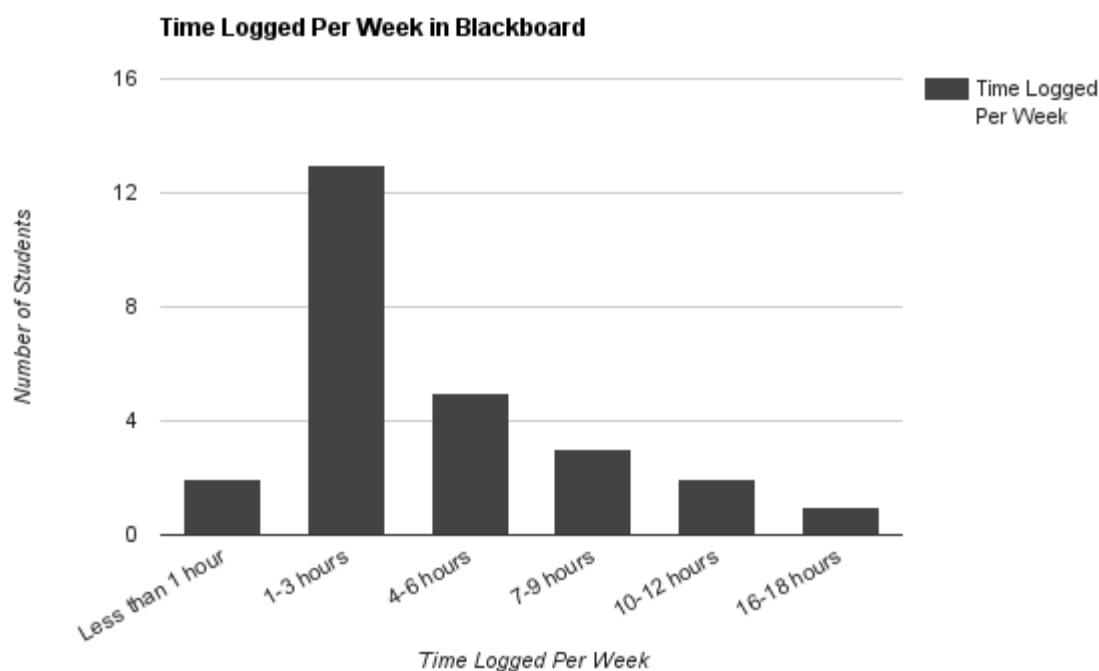
A Fisher's Exact Test<sup>15</sup> was calculated to determine if there was a relationship between course length and expected time spent on coursework. The result was statistically significant ( $p=.009$ ). This result suggests that course length, as noted above, has an impact on the number of hours per week that students expect to spend on coursework. Interestingly, though, most students still did not, as noted previously, expect to spend the amount of time that the college expects them to based on course length.

## 5.2.2 Time Logged into Blackboard

**5.2.2.1 Meeting Expectations.** One area of participation that the Student Progress Report tracked was time logged into Blackboard. I tracked, and then averaged, the number of hours

<sup>15</sup> This test was appropriate here because it tests non-normally distributed data to see if two variables are independent of each other.

spent logged in per week for each student. Those averages were then placed into the categories listed as answer options for the expected time spent question from the questionnaire. Those categories were: 1-3 hours, 4-6 hours, 7-9 hours, 10-12 hours, 13-15 hours, 16-18 hours, and 18+ hours. The questionnaire contained the option “0,” but since there were students who spent less than 1 hour but more than 0 hours, this category was changed to “Less than 1 hour.” Overall, half of the tracked students (13) spent 1-3 hours logged into Blackboard per week, while two (8%) spent less than 1 hour logged in. Additionally, five students (19%) spent 4-6 hours, three students (12%) spent 7-9 hours, two (8%) spent 10-12 hours, and one student (3%) spent 16-18 hours (see *Figure 5.3*).



*Figure 5.3.* Time Logged Per Week in Blackboard. This graph illustrates the number of students logged into Blackboard for specific ranges of hours each week.

Considering this result in light of expected time spent, there is a shift to the left, indicating that students were logged in for fewer hours per week than they expected to be (see *Figure 5.4*).

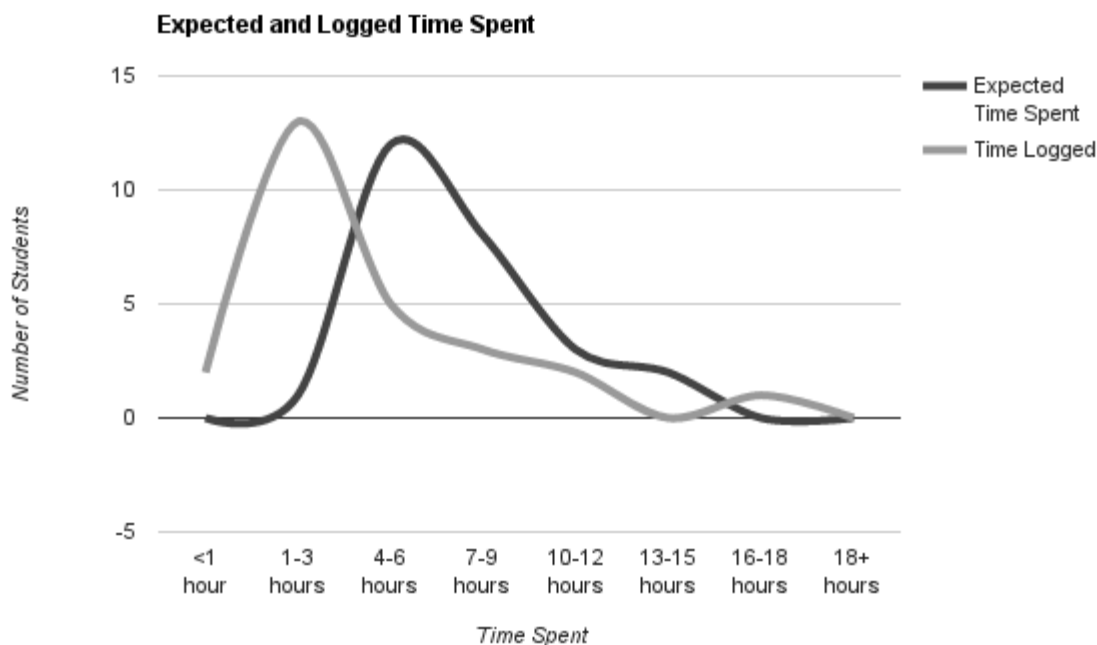


Figure 5.4. Expected and Logged Time Spent. This graph illustrates the shift between expected time spent on the course and the average time logged per week by Blackboard.

In order to determine if student expectations were met by the amount of time logged in, a table was set up with three columns: expected time spent, time logged, and difference. The third column was coded with *Less*, *Same*, and *More* depending on whether or not the logged time was less, the same, or more than the expected time spent. The results show that 77% of students logged less hours than they expected and that 11.5% logged more hours and 11.5% logged the same hours as they expected. This result suggests that the majority of students were not logged into Blackboard for as many hours as they expected to participate.

**5.2.2.2 Expectations and Success.** Overall, time logged into Blackboard did not meet student expectations for the course, but students' reported time spent from the interviews did meet their expectations reported in the questionnaire. To begin analyzing the impact of expectations on grades, how expectations were met and student success were reported in a chart.

Then, the results from the analysis of whether or not expectations were met were compared to final grades using a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test.<sup>16</sup> This test was used to determine if the expectations being met or unmet could predict the final grade for each student.

When considering whether student expectations were met by their time logged into Blackboard, 73% were successful and their expectations were not met (62% logged in less time than expected), 12% were successful and their expectations were met, and 15% were unsuccessful and their expectations were not met (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1

*Difference between Time Expected and Time Logged and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Less	16	3
Same	3	0
More	3	1

For this expectation, the Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test was 0, and so had no statistical significance. This result means that the number of logins on Blackboard being more or less than the expected participation frequency established by the questionnaire did not significantly predict whether or not students were successful. To make sure that the variables were truly independent of each other, a Fisher's Exact Test was run. This test was also statistically insignificant ( $p=.983$ ). While this result means that the sample does not represent the population, it is important to consider that the majority of students who were successful did not

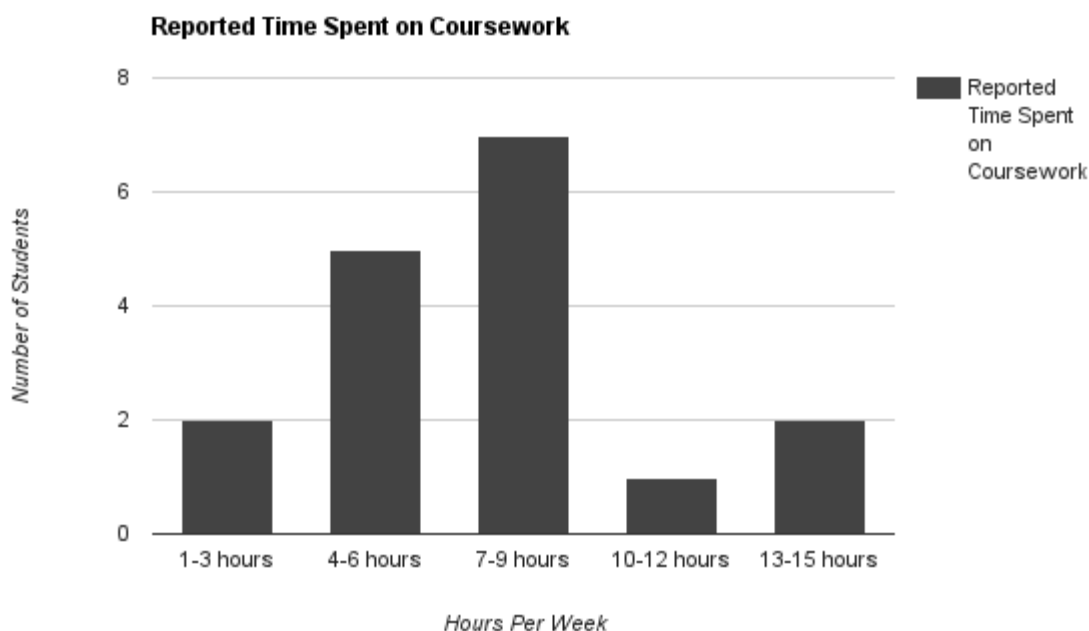
<sup>16</sup> This test was appropriate because the variables were multinomial and the goal was to see if the independent variable could predict the dependent variable. Additionally, the data was not normally distributed and the sample size was small.

have their expectations met because less work was required. Considering that perceived difficulty can decrease retention (Friedman & Mandel, 2011), it is not surprising that so many students who were met with less work were successful. Another important consideration is that none of the 4 students who were unsuccessful had their expectations met by the time logged into Blackboard. This result likely means students just stopped participating, but the journey of the unsuccessful students will be analyzed further in Chapter 7.

### **5.2.3 Time Reported**

However, as discussed in Chapter 3, it is important to keep in mind that when logging into Blackboard, like any other learning management system, if you log in and walk away, it is counting the number of seconds, minutes, and hours until you are kicked out or logout.

Additionally, Blackboard time does not count time students spend writing that is not in Blackboard itself. It is, therefore, necessary to triangulate the data collection methods to determine whether or not student expectations were met in regard to time spent on coursework. This triangulation will also allow consideration of how much time students are spending on assignments before submitting them. That said, the next data set regarding time is the time reported by students in the interview. Of the 17 students who were interviewed, two (12%) reported spending 1-3 hours per week, five (29%) reported spending 4-6 hours a week, seven (41%) reported spending 7-9 hours a week, one (6%) spent 10-12 hours a week, and two (12%) spent 13-15 hours a week (see *Figure 5.5*).

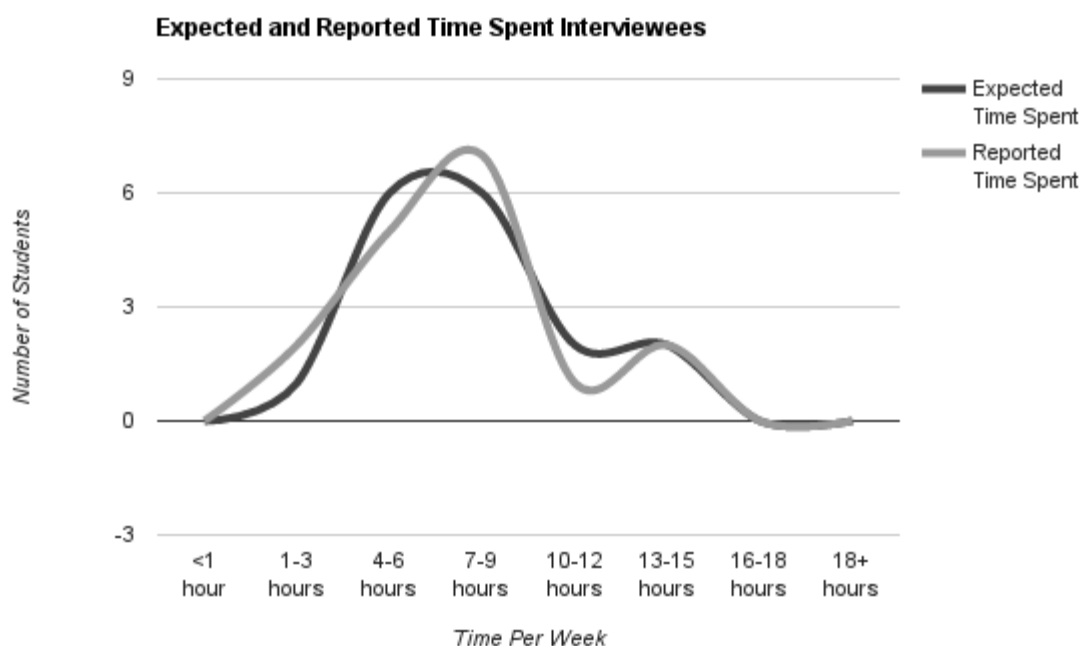


*Figure 5.5.* Reported Time Spent on Coursework. This graph illustrates the number of hours interviewed students reported spending on coursework.

When comparing the expected and reported time spent on coursework, there does not seem to be a significant shift (see *Figure 5.6*). However, this was the only response from the questionnaire that had a statistically significant relationship between course length and expected time spent. Therefore, a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>17</sup> was run to determine if course length had an impact on reported time spent. The test result ( $p=.356$ ) was not statistically significant. This result indicates that there was not a relationship between course length and the amount of time students reported spending on course work. This result suggests that students who were in shorter courses were not reporting more hours despite the condensed format of the course. This finding is interesting considering NOVA's expectations for the number of hours students should

<sup>17</sup>This test was used because it is intended for non normally distributed categorical data. It's purpose is to determine independence between two variables.

spend for online courses increases as the course length decreases and that course length did impact expectations.



*Figure 5.6.* Expected and Reported Time Spent. This graph illustrates the curves of the data for the expected number and reported number of hours spent on coursework.

The expected and reported time spent were also ordinal data and so could be analyzed using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test<sup>18</sup> to determine if there was a significant difference between the responses provided by individual students. This test ( $Z=-.465$ ,  $p=.642$ ) was not statistically significant. This result means that any change between individual student responses is not representative of the population, and so expectations can be considered met.

**5.2.3.1 Expectations and Success.** Charting success and whether or not expectations were met by the students' reported time spent in the interview resulted in 47% of students who

<sup>18</sup> This test was used because it is intended for pre- and post-test type responses. It is also used for data that is not normally distributed and small sample sizes.



were successful and did not have expectations met, 35% were successful and had their expectations met, and 18% were unsuccessful and did not have their expectations met (see *Table 5.2*).

Table 5.2

*Difference between Expectations and Reported Time Spent and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Less	4	2
Same	6	0
More	4	1

In order to run the statistical tests, the independent variable (whether or not expectations were met) was grouped to answer the question “Were expectations met?” with a Yes or No response. Again, a Goodman and Kruskal’s Lambda Test<sup>19</sup> was run and found to be 0, which means that whether or not students’ reported time spent in the interview matched what they expected in the questionnaire did not significantly predict student success. A Fisher’s Exact Test<sup>20</sup> was also run and was not significant ( $p=1.0$ ), which indicates that the variables are truly independent of each other. It is important to consider here that none of the unsuccessful students had their expectations met, but most were also reporting less time spent than expected.

#### 5.2.4 Outliers

Out of the four unsuccessful students who were tracked, three logged into Blackboard less than they expected and one logged in significantly more than expected. Out of the three

<sup>19</sup> This test was run because it is intended to determine whether or not a multinomial independent variable can predict a dependent variable in a data set that is not normally distributed with a small sample size.

<sup>20</sup> This test was also run because it only tests for independence, not for predictive value.

interviewed students who were unsuccessful, two students reported spending fewer hours per week than they expected. The student that reported spending more hours than expected was also the student who logged more hours than expected (NAS1618). There were two students who were both tracked and interviewed. One student logged and reported more time spent (NAS1618) and the other (NAS1627) logged and reported less time spent (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3

*Outliers: Unsuccessful Student Time Spent Per Week*

Student	Expected	Logged in Blackboard	Reported
NAS1614	4-6 hours	Not tracked	1-3 hours
NAS1617	4-6 hours	1-3 hours	Not interviewed
NAS1618	1-3 hours	10-12 hours	4-6 hours
NAS1627	4-6 hours	Less than an hour	1-3 hours
NAS1636	7-9 hours	Less than an hour	Not interviewed

While most students who were not successful predictably spent less time logged in and reported less time spent than expected, the student who did not (NAS1618) will be reconsidered when the responses to the interview questions regarding performance are analyzed in Chapter 7. There was one student who was considered an outlier in their expectations of time spent. This student (NAS1616) expected to spend 16-18 hours a week, but was not tracked or interviewed, so there is no way to tell if expectations or success were impacted. There was also a student (NAS1607) who logged 16-18 hours a week, but had expected 13-15 hours and reported 13-15 hours a week. This student earned an *A*, but it appears that this student had a good idea of how much time they would need to spend on coursework to be successful in the course.

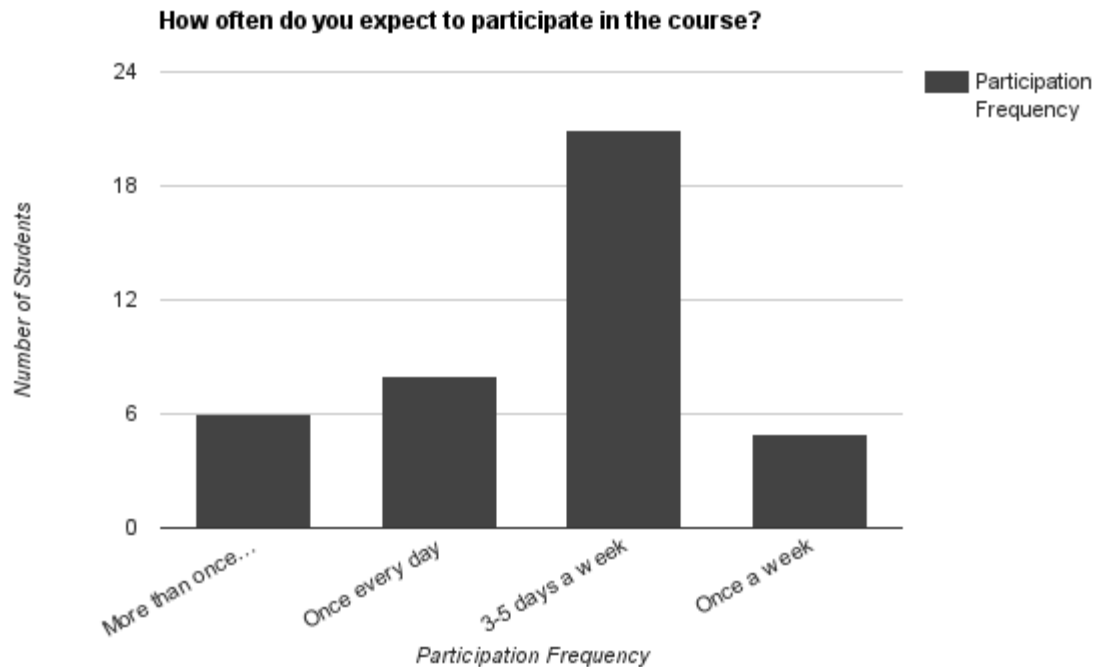
### 5.2.5 Time Spent Discussion

Student expectations were not met by average Blackboard login time as the majority logged in less time than expected. As previously discussed, this result may be because login time does not account for the work being outside the Learning Management System (LMS). Met expectations for login time did not lead to success; however, most unmet expectations required less work than expected. Therefore, it is not surprising that 82% of students were successful. Overall, student expectations were met by their own perceptions of time spent. Despite this perception, success does not seem to be impacted by perceived expectations being met. However, students in shorter courses, despite expecting to spend more time overall, did not in fact report spending more time than those in traditional length courses. Regardless, students across all course lengths still did not expect or report to spend as much time as the institution expects students to spend (based on course length). However, across all areas, there was no statistically significant impact of met or unmet expectations on success. As discussed earlier, small sample size might be the culprit, so further study would be necessary.

## 5.3 Participation Frequency

### 5.3.1 Expectations

When answering the questionnaire item “How often do you expect to participate in the course?” the majority of students (52.5%) answered 3-5 days a week, 22.5% expected to participate every day, 15% expected to participate once a day, and 10% expected to participate once a week (see *Figure 5.7*).



*Figure 5.7.* How often do you expect to participate in the course? This graph illustrates how often students expected to participate in coursework.

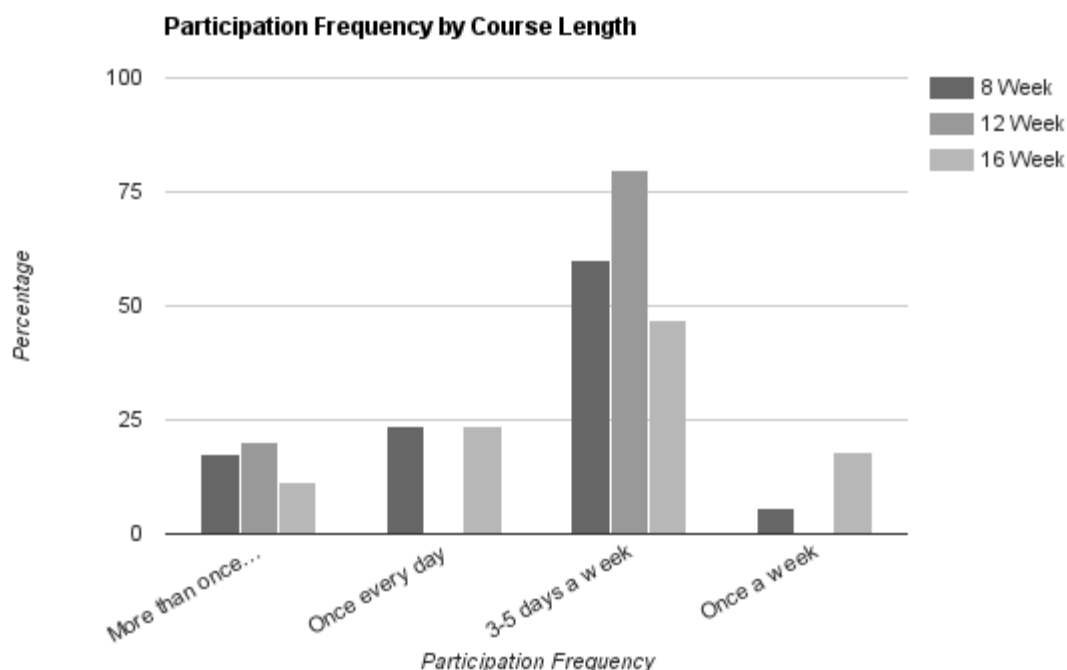
Both of these questions, however, may be reliant on the length of the course, so the data was then sorted based on the number of weeks in the course and reanalyzed. There were 17 students enrolled in an 8-week course. For the question regarding how often they expect to participate, 52.9% (nine students) expected 3-5 days a week, 23.5% (four students) expected once every day, 17.6% (three students) expected more than once a day, and 5.88% (one student) expected once a week. There were 17 students who took the survey who were enrolled in a 16-week course. Of those 17, eight students (47%) expected to participate 3-5 days, four students (23.5%) expected to participate once every day, two students (11.5%) expected to participate more than once a day, and three students (18%) expected to participate once a week. There were five students who took the survey who were enrolled in a 12-week course. For the question regarding the number of days a week the student expected to participate, four students (80%)

expected to participate 3-5 days a week and one (20%) expected to participate more than once a day.

When comparing participation frequency expectations by course length (*Figure 5.8*), the data suggests that course length does not drastically impact how often students are expecting to participate, but the “outliers” can be explained by course length. Most of the students who indicated that they expected to participate the most frequently were enrolled in shortened courses. This result is not surprising considering that shortened courses often have more than one deadline a week. Additionally, most of the students expecting to participate the least frequently were enrolled in the traditional 16-week course. A Fisher’s Exact Test<sup>21</sup> confirmed this finding and resulted in no statistical significance ( $p=.846$ ) in the relationship between course length and participation frequency.

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<sup>21</sup> This test was run because the data was not normally distributed and the sample size was small, resulting in a Chi-Square test with more than 5% of the cells empty. The variables were also categorical, making this test appropriate.



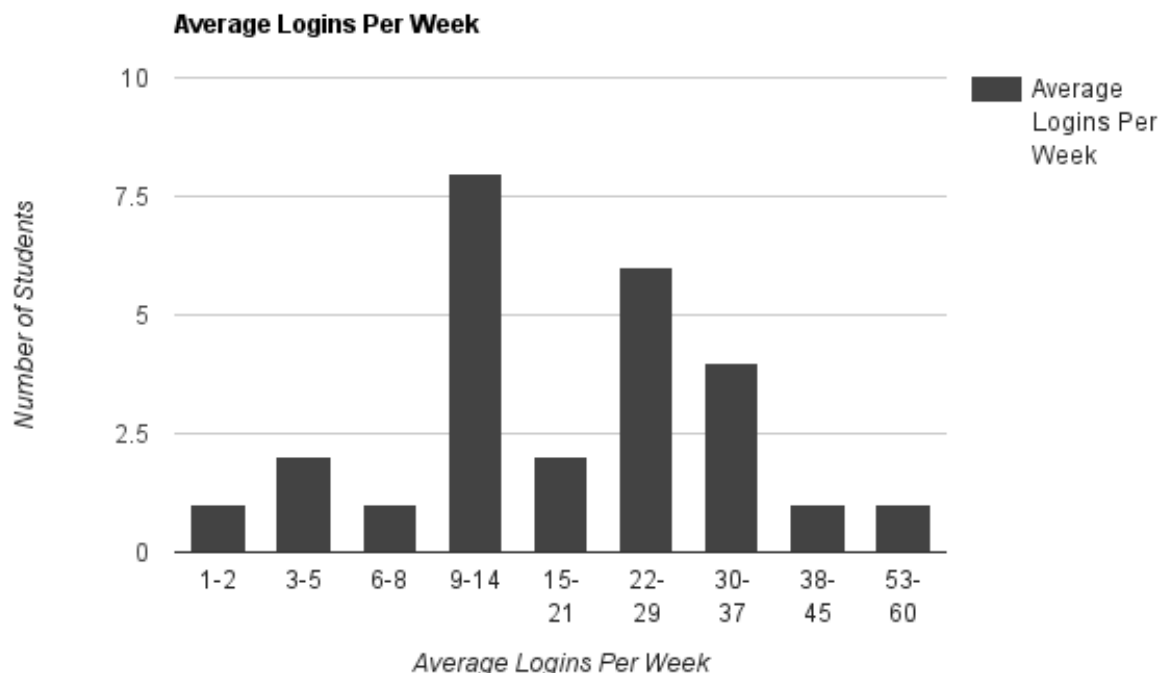
*Figure 5.8.* Participation Frequency by Course Length. This chart illustrates how often students expected to participate based on the length of the class they were enrolled in.

Active participation in college courses is directly correlated to retention in other studies (Finnegan, et al., 2009; Kraemer, 1993). Studies have also suggested that unmet expectations can lead to institutional dropout (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Friedman & Mandel, 2011; Pleitz, et al., 2015). It is, therefore, encouraging that students expected to participate in the course fairly frequently.

### 5.3.2 Meeting Expectations with Blackboard Logins

In order to gauge how frequently students are participating in the course the number of times students logged in per week was collected. While login data is by no means a complete picture of student participation (again, it does not necessarily capture writing time that probably takes place in a word processor, that the student was kicked out five times in the same hour, nor

does it mean students are participating in the course in productive ways) login frequency data does allow the researcher to see whether or not students are just not completing the work or if they are not logging in altogether. As discussed in Chapter 3, in order to format the data to be compatible with graph form and with the expectations for participation frequency data, the number of logins collected from Blackboard were group together based on the established categories from the questionnaire (1-2 logins being the equivalent of participating Once a week). After eight logins, logins were grouped together by sevens (because there are 7 days in a week) The averages are reported in *Figure 5.9*, with one student logging in 1-2 times, two logging in 3-5 times, one logging in 6-8 times, eight logging in 9-14 times, two logging in 15-21 times, six logging in 22-29 times, four logging in 30-37 times, one logging in 38-45, and one logging in 53-60 times. This result means that the largest percentage of students (31%) logged in an average of 1-2 times a day.



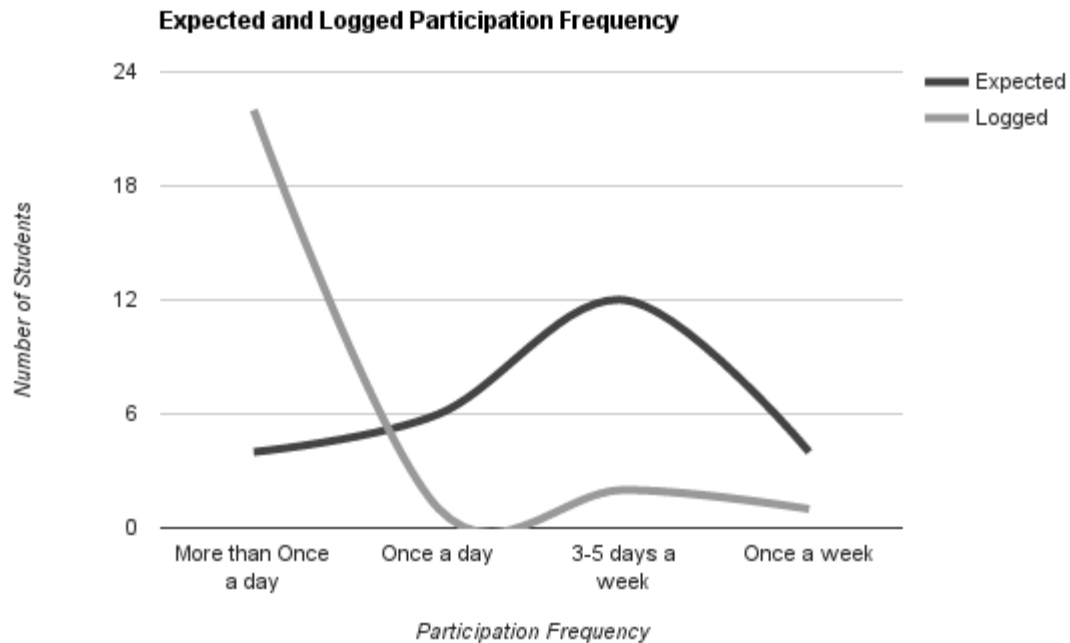
*Figure 5.9. Average Logins Per Week.* This graph illustrates the average number of times students being tracked logged in per week.

Because students may log in more frequently if they are doing more work in a week, it was necessary to determine if there was a relationship between course length and the number of logins. Therefore, a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>22</sup> was run. The results ( $p=.10$ ) were not statistically significant. This result means that course length did not impact the average number of times students logged in per week.

The number of logins was then compared to the expected participation frequency by converting the number of times students logged in to the participation frequency categories established in the questionnaire. For example, 1-2 logins became "Once a week." See *Figure 5.10* for the comparison.

<sup>22</sup> This test was run because the data was not normal and the sample size was small. The variables were also categorical.





*Figure 5.10.* Expected and Logged Participation Frequency. This graph illustrates the change in frequency between how much students expected to participate and how many times they logged in during an average week.

There seems to be a shift toward students logging in significantly more than they expected to. When comparing individual student responses, there were only three students who did not end up logging in more than expected and these were the three students who were unsuccessful in the course (and the average logins for those students included weeks they were not logging in at all). This result would suggest that students either needed to review materials more frequently, were posting more than expected, had access issues or might have even been kicked out of Blackboard frequently.

### 5.3.3 Expectations and Success

When considering participation frequency expectations that were met or unmet by Blackboard logins and comparing them to student success, 85% of students were successful and

did not have expectations met, while 11% were unsuccessful and had expectations met, and 4% were unsuccessful and did not have expectations met (see *Table 5.4*).

Table 5.4

*Participation Frequency Expectations and Logins and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Less	0	0
Same	0	3
More	22	1

A Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test<sup>23</sup> was 0, which indicates that there was no statistical relationship between having expectations met by how frequently students logged in and final grades. A Fisher's Exact Test<sup>24</sup> was also not statistically significant ( $p=.387$ ). It is important to consider, however, that logging into Blackboard may not have been done only to submit or complete graded work, but may also have occurred in order to review materials or assignment instructions. This finding might suggest that those who are logging in more are more likely to be successful because they are more familiar with both the material and the assignment parameters. This idea is supported by the fact that 75% of unsuccessful students had their expectations met, meaning that they did not login the number of times that might be necessary to be successful.

### 5.3.4 Meeting Expectations with Assignments

The number of logins and time spent in the course only paint part of the participation picture. In online courses, submitted and graded assignments are the most common way to track

<sup>23</sup> This was run because the data was not normally distributed, the sample size was small, the variables were multinomial and it tests for the predictive value of an independent variable.

<sup>24</sup> This was run because the data was not normally distributed and the sample size was small. It was run in addition to the Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda because it only tests to see if the variables are independent of each other.

real participation in a course. In order to determine if students' expectations were met by the course, assignments were counted and the average number of assignments submitted per week was calculated. These numbers were then converted to the participation frequency categories from the questionnaire (see Table 5.5). Because there was an assignment at least every week, if students posted all assignments on the same day, the participation for every class would be *Once a week*. This calculation was not included in Table 5.5, but was included in the calculations below.

Table 5.5

*Required Graded Assignments by Course*

Course	Total Graded Assignments	Average Graded Assignments/ Week	Participation Frequency
ENG111 8-week	40	5	3-5 days a week
ENG111 12-week	34	2.83	2-3 days a week
ENG111 16-week	43	2.69	2-3 days a week
ENG112 8-week	19	2.38	2-3 days a week
ENG112 12-week	20	1.67	1-2 days a week
ENG112 16-week	20	1.25	1-2 days a week

A table was then created to determine if student expectations of participation frequency were met by the course requirements. The first column contained the expectations established by each student in the questionnaire responses, the second column contained the participation frequency required by the course (as calculated in Table 5.5), and the third column was coded *Less*, *Same*, or *More* depending on the difference from expectations to requirements. It was found that 14.3% of students were required to participate with the same frequency as they

expected, and so had their expectations met. This finding means that the majority of students did not have their expectations met by the course with 82.1% required to participate less frequently and 3.6% required to participate more frequently than expected. Overall, the courses required students to participate less frequently than they expected, which would suggest that participation frequency expectations were not met.

### 5.3.5 Expectations and Success

**5.3.5.1 Required Assignments.** The final measure of participation in this study, as discussed previously, was the frequency expected by the course based on the number of assignments and weeks in each course. In this case, 60% of students were successful and did not have their expectations met (47% of students were successful and the course required less work than expected), 17% of students were successful and had their expectations met, 17% of students were unsuccessful and did not have their expectations met (less was expected of them), and 6% of students were unsuccessful and had their expectations met (see Table 5.6).

Table 5.6

*Graded Assignments Meeting Expectations and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Less	8	3
Same	3	1
More	2	0

A Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test<sup>25</sup> was again run and the result was 0, suggesting that there was no relationship between expectations about participation frequency being met by course requirements and final grades. This result was confirmed by a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>26</sup> that was not statistically significant ( $p=1.0$ ). Again, it is important to consider that the majority of successful students were required to complete less work than expected. Though this is also true for the majority of unsuccessful students, there are likely other factors at play.

**5.3.5.2 Submitted Assignments as Success.** In an online class, submitting assignments is participating. Blackboard data on assignment submission was also collected as another way to look at the complex picture of student participation in an online course as well as student performance. Course assignments were coded as *On Time (OT)*, *Late (L)*, or *Not Submitted (NS)* when entered into the Student Progress Report. I then calculated the percentage of *OT*, *L* and *NS* assignments for each student. The results (see *Figure 5.11*) show that most students submitted most assignments *On Time*.

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<sup>25</sup> This test was run because the data was not normal, the variable was multinomial, and it is predictive.

<sup>26</sup> This was run because the data was not normally distributed, the sample size was small and it tests to see if two variables are independent.

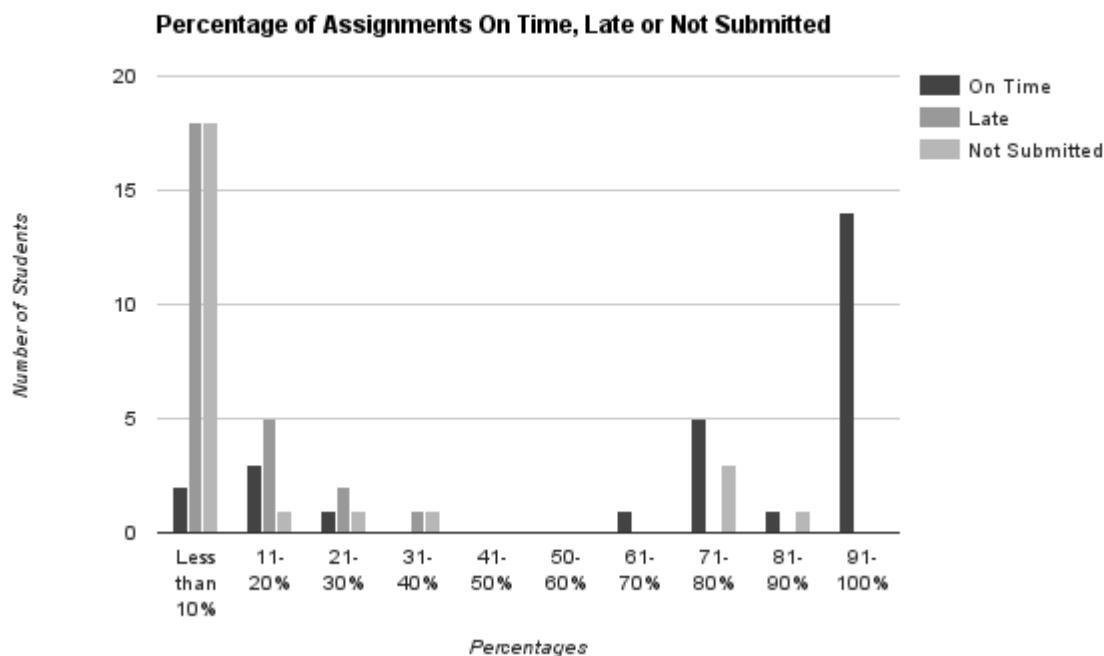


Figure 5.11. Percentage of Assignments On Time, Late or Not Submitted. This graph represents the percentage of assignments submitted on time, late or not at all.

In order to determine if student expectations have a relationship with the percentage of assignments that were On Time, Late or Not Submitted, a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>27</sup> was run. The results were not significant for any submission type (OT  $p=.851$ ; L  $p=.521$ ; NS  $p=.137$ ). It does not appear that expectations have an impact on assignment submission as a measure of performance.

### 5.3.6 Outliers

**5.3.6.1 Unsuccessful Students.** Of the four tracked students who were unsuccessful, three met their reported expectations with their Blackboard logins. The one who did not logged in a little more frequently than both expected to and required. A total of four out of the five students who were unsuccessful were enrolled in courses that required less participation than

<sup>27</sup> This was used because the data was not normally distributed and the sample size was small.

expected leaving one student (NAS1618) that had expectations met by the course. All of the unsuccessful students submitted less than 25% of the required assignments (this includes on time and late submissions). Additionally, out of the four tracked students, half stopped logging in over two-thirds of the way through the course and half stopped logging in approximately one-quarter of the way through (see Table 5.7).

Table 5.7

*Outliers: Unsuccessful Expectations, Logins, Requirements and Submissions*

Student Code	Expected Participation Frequency	Blackboard Login	Required Course Participation	Stopped Logging In	Submitted Assignments OT/L/NS
NAS1614	Once every day	Not tracked	1-2 times a week	Not tracked	Not tracked
NAS1617	3-5 days a week	3-5 times a week	1-2 times a week	Week 4 of 16	17%/6%/77%
NAS1618	Once a week	1-2 times a week	1-2 times a week	Week 5 of 16	11%/11%/78%
NAS1627	3-5 days a week	3-5 times a week	1-2 times a week	Week 9 of 12	6%/11%/83%
NAS1636	3-5 days a week	6-8 times a week	2-3 times a week	Week 5 of 8	17%/6%/77%

This data suggests that students overall are expecting more work than is required by the course; however, this result does not seem to impact success.

**5.3.6.2 Blackboard Logins.** Not surprisingly, the same student who was an outlier for the time spent logged in (NAS1607) was also an outlier for the number of logins. This student, who succeeded with an *A*, logged into Blackboard approximately 53-60 times a week. It appears that logging in and spending time on Blackboard when logged in were helpful to this student's

success. The remaining login outliers, those who logged in less than an average of 15-21 times per week, were the unsuccessful students.

**5.3.6.3 Submitted Assignments.** Of course, the majority of the outliers for assignments submission are the unsuccessful student. These students submitted less than 75% of the required assignments. However, there were three successful students who submitted more than 20% of their assignments late (see Table 5.8).

Table 5.8

*Outliers: Submitted Assignments*

Student Code	Expected Participation Frequency	Submitted Assignments OT/L/NS	Final Grade
NAS1620	Once every day	75%/23%/2%	B
NAS1628	Once every day	72%/22%/6%	A
NAS1631	3-5 days a week	28%/39%/33%	A

Based on Table 5.8, it appears that Student NAS1631 probably submitted the NS assignments late, but later than the researcher collected the data. Fortunately, the course was still open, so once the initial analysis was complete, I was able to return to this particular student's submission status for each assignment. It was found that several assignments were submitted more than two weeks late. It is assumed that the late submissions for these students were likely not penalized. Interestingly, it is the student (NAS1631) who expected less participation frequency that submitted the smallest percentage of on-time assignments.

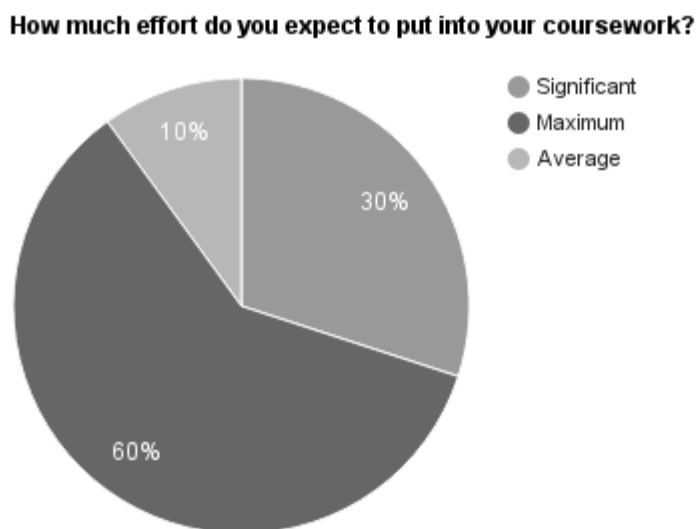


### 5.3.7 Participation Frequency Discussion

When considering whether or not participation frequency expectations were met, Blackboard logins and required assignments both indicate that student expectations were not met. Overall, students logged into Blackboard more frequently than expected. While this result was not statistically tied to success, all of the successful students logged in more than they expected and only one unsuccessful student logged in more than expected (though this student logged in 6-8 times but expected 3-5 times). This result leaves the connection between expectations and success unclear. This finding might suggest that students who are successful are more persistent when kicked out or need to access instructions more often. It might also suggest that unsuccessful students were not willing or able (due to time constraints or access issues) to log in when they needed to. It might also be that Blackboard login data is not an accurate measure of participation frequency. This study attempted to triangulate this issue by including required assignments as a test, but further research is likely the best way to continue determining whether or not expected participation is met by the course and whether or not that leads to success. While the average number of assignments per-week do not meet student expectations for participation, the requirements expected less work from students than they expected. Less work may result in more success. When considering that there were students who submitted more than 90% of their assignments but only 75% on time (and still earned an *A* in the course), there might be a connection between instructor leniency and student success. Finally, when comparing expectations with submitted graded assignments, expectations did not have an impact on submission as a measure of success in the course.

### 5.4 Effort and Difficulty

For item 11 on the questionnaire, which asked how much effort students expected to put into the coursework, all students responded with at least average effort (see *Figure 5.12*). The majority, 60% (24 students), responded with maximum effort, and 30% (12 students) responded with significant effort while 10% (four students) responded with average effort. No students selected Little Effort or No Effort (the other two options for this question). This result indicates that students are expecting the course to require effort on their part and that they plan to put forth more effort, overall, into course assignments than into communication in the course (see *Figure 4.17* on page 133).



*Figure 5.12.* How much effort do you expect to put into your coursework? This chart illustrates how much effort students are expecting to put into their coursework.

Item 12 on the questionnaire asked students how easy or difficult they expected the course to be.

There was no real majority for this question, but the greatest number of students, 47.5% (19

students), responded that they expected the course to be somewhat difficult. The remaining students were split amongst all possible options with 20% (eight students) expecting the course to be somewhat easy, 12.5% (five students) expecting the course to be difficult, 7.5% (three students) expecting the course to be easy, 2.5% (one student) expecting the course to be very difficult, and one student (2.5%) expecting the course to be very easy. Interestingly, three students (7.5%) selected that they were not sure what to expect as far as difficulty in the course (see *Figure 5.13*).



*Figure 5.13.* How difficult or easy do you expect the course to be? This chart illustrates how easy or difficult students expected the course to be.

When considering students responses to questions 11 and 12 together, a Fisher's Exact Test<sup>28</sup> was done with an alpha of .05 and resulted in no statistical significance ( $p=.059$ ) in the

<sup>28</sup> This test was run because the data was not normally distributed and the sample size was small. The test is intended to determine if there is an independence relationship between two variables.

relationship between expected effort and expected difficulty. This is an interesting result because I had expected there to be a statistically significant relationship. My expectation was that the higher the expected difficulty was, the higher the expected effort would be.

Item 13 on the questionnaire was an open-ended question that asked students to describe what makes a course difficult or easy. The responses fell into one of three broad categories: Course Factors, Instructor Factors, and Student Factors. The Course Factors were broken down into Course Design, Course Content, and Course Requirements. Arguably, some of the Course Factors that impact difficulty might be expected by the student to be the doing of the instructor as it might not be common knowledge to the student that the courses are pre-designed. These codes were listed under Course Factors and not Instructor Factors because the courses are pre-designed and the instructor cannot control these factors.

There were seven students who indicated Course Design factors and they included the clarity and presentation of materials and instructions. There were 10 statements that indicated Course Content as a difficulty factor and included *new material*, *the subject*, and *research*. The final Course Factor was Course Requirements and there were 23 statements indicating these as a difficulty factor. This category included the *types of assignments*, *amount of time*, *amount of work*, and *amount of effort required* and is in line with retention scholarship that indicates course design as an important factor in student success (Dietz-Uhler, et al., 2007; Moore, et al., 2003).

There were 10 students who indicated Instructor Factors as a difficulty factor. The codes in this category were *grading*, *instructor effort*, *instructor excitement*, *instructor connection*, *instructor communication*, and *the "teaching."* There were 24 statements that indicated Student Factors and these were related to *subject preferences*, *understanding the material and assignments*, *ability to balance work/life*, *self-teaching*, *amount of self-discipline*, *amount of*

*motivation, amount of time, amount of effort, and mentally demanding material and assignments.*

This result is also in line with much of the retention studies literature that indicates the importance of and instructor interaction to student success (Herbert, 2006; Moore, et al., 2003; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Nash, 2005).

Both *subject* and *amount of effort* fell into Course Factors and Student Factors. *Subject* counted for both course content and student factors because statements would list the subject as a problem and then explain the student issues with the subject. The *amount of effort* statements were actually divided between student factors and course requirements based on whether the student indicated that they would have to put effort in or indicated that the course required more effort (see Table 5.9).

Table 5.9

*Difficulty Definitions*

Difficulty Categories	Codes	Student Response Examples
Course Design	<i>Clarity of instructions, clarity of materials, presentation of materials</i>	“How the material is presented” (NAS1618) “unclear directions” (NAS1610) “whether or not if [sic] the online instructions are clear” (NAS1601)
Course Content	<i>New material, subject, research</i>	“Material covered”(NAS1630) “The materials we learn in class” (NAS1627) “A class is more difficult depending on the subject content”(NAS1613)

Table 5.9 Continued

Difficulty Categories	Codes	Student Response Examples
Course Requirements	<i>Type of assignments, amount of time, amount of work, amount of effort</i>	<p>“The type of work required” (NAS1628)  “amount of work” (NAS1634) “How much assigned work you have to complete per week.” (NAS1626) “The number of assignments” (NAS1618)  “an easy class requires little thinking or effort” (NAS1613)</p>
Instructor	<i>The “teaching,” grading tendencies, teacher connection, teacher communication, teacher excitement, teacher effort</i>	<p>“How hard the professor grades”(NAS1634) “...how willing the teacher is to connect with the students” (NAS1620) “When the teacher is excited to teach...a class is difficult the teacher doesn’t put any effort into the class...” (NAS16NC1) “The teaching.” (NASInc2)</p>
Student	<i>Subject preferences, mentally demanding material, comprehension, amount of effort, personal motivation, work/life balance, self-taught</i>	<p>“Math and science take me longer to process” (NAS1630) “how mentally demanding it is” (NAS1631)  “Comprehension of course material” (NAS1632) “Basically, I am guiding myself” (NAS1636) “balancing your schedule and sticking with it” (NAS25)  “The juggle of work life balance” (NAS1624) “I find that a difficult class is one that makes me think more” (NAS1608)</p>

In addition to listing the factors that make a course difficult, students often assigned responsibility for difficulty. These were divided into two categories: Personal Responsibility and Instructor Responsibility. There were 19 statements that indicated student responsibility or “fault” for the difficulty of a course and these statements were identified by the use of personal pronouns, “you” or “student.” There were 24 statements that indicated that the source of

difficulty was related to the instructor. These statements were identified by direct references to the instructor as well as verbs like “given,” “assigned,” and “taught.” In this case, when course design was indicated as responsible, it was counted toward instructor responsibility because students are not typically aware of the separation of instructor and design in these courses and so are unaware that the instructor is not to “blame” for course design that they find problematic. I also tried to keep this study focused on the student perspective. The remaining statements simply listed the factor without necessarily indicating blame (see Table 5.10).

Table 5.10

*Responsibility for Difficulty*

Responsibility Category	Codes	Student Response Examples
Personal	<i>Personal pronoun, “you,” “student,” unspoken personal pronoun</i>	“take me” (NAS1630) “you have to” (NAS1626) “Personal motivation.” (NAS1622)
Instructor	<i>Instructor reference, given, assigned, taught, required</i>	“that is given” (NAS1623) “level of participation required” (NAS1634) “assigned work” (NAS1626) “depends on what the teacher assigns” (NAS1614) “an easy going teacher” (NAS16Inc1)

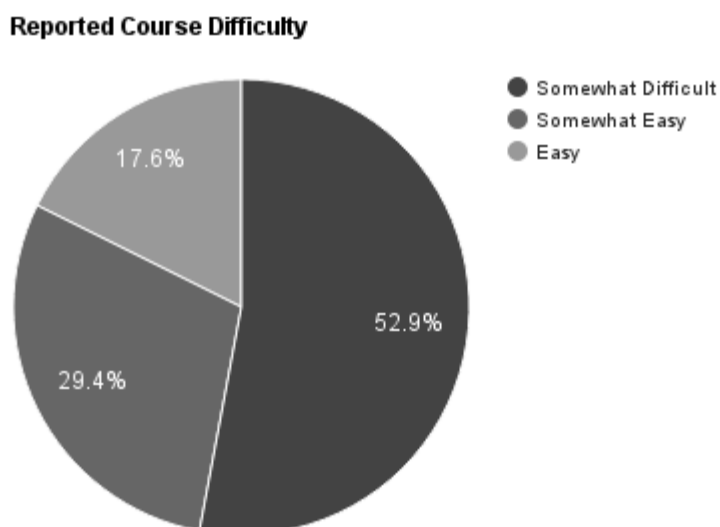
These codes were then compared to the responses in question 12 (concerning expected difficulty) using a Fisher’s Exact Test.<sup>29</sup> There was no statistical significance ( $p=.097$ ) to the relationship between expected difficulty and how students defined difficult in a course.

<sup>29</sup> This test was used because the data was categorical and not normally distributed. Additionally, the sample size was small.

Therefore, students who expected a certain difficulty level did not necessarily define difficulty in exactly the same way.

#### 5.4.1 Meeting Expectations

In order to determine if expectations of difficulty were met, the results of the interview question relating to the difficulty of the course need to be reported. Of those interviewed, just over half (53%) said the course was somewhat difficult, about 29% said it was somewhat easy, and 18% said it was easy (see *Figure 5.14*).



*Figure 5.14.* Reported Course Difficulty. This chart illustrates the percentage of interviewees who reported the difficulty levels included.

When comparing this result, visually, to the expected course difficulty for the same group of students, there is a definite shift toward the right, indicating that students' experiences in the courses were easier than expected (see *Figure 5.15*).



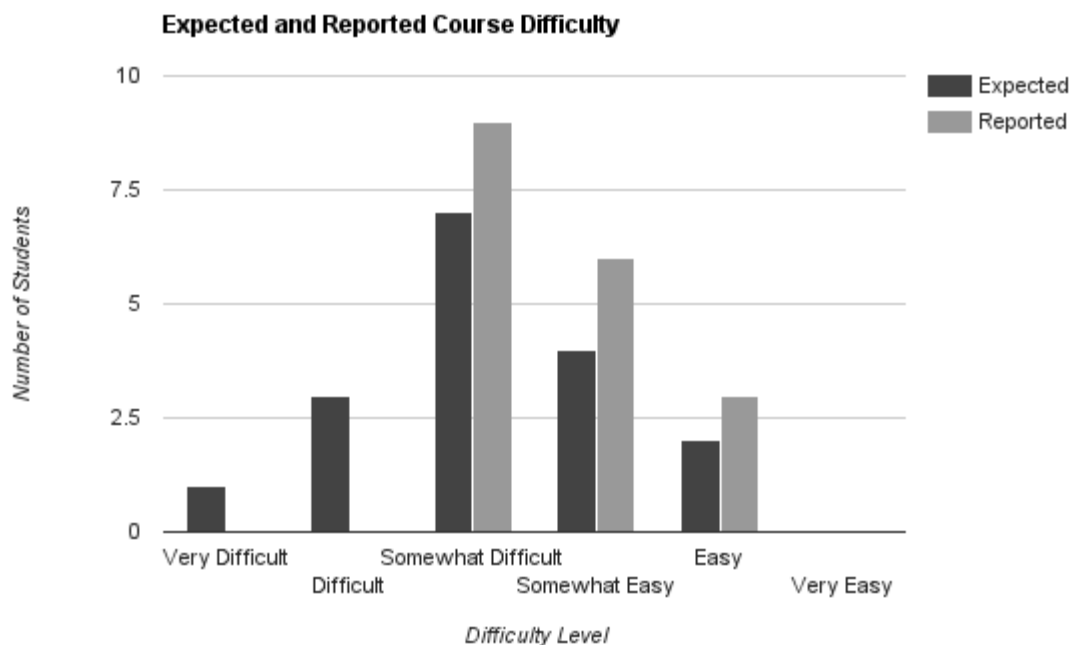


Figure 5.15. Expected and Reported Course Difficulty. This graph illustrates the number of students who expected and reported specific levels of difficulty.

This relationship was tested using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test<sup>30</sup> and the results ( $Z=-1.42$ ,  $p=.155$ ) were not statistically significant. This result suggests that while some students did not have their expectations met, overall, there was no change between expected and reported course difficulty.

#### 5.4.2 Expectations and Success

When comparing met expectations to success, 47% of students were successful and did not have their expectations met (29% reported the course being easier), 35% were successful and had their expectations met, and all three unsuccessful students (18%) had their expectations met (see Table 5.11).

<sup>30</sup> This test was used because the sample size was small, the data was not normally distributed, and the test is intended for pre- and post-test responses.

Table 5.11

*Difficulty Expected and Reported and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Easier	5	0
Same	6	3
Harder	3	0

A Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test<sup>31</sup> again resulted in a value of 0, which indicates that there was no relationship between met/unmet course difficulty expectations and final grades. While this result suggests that this sample is not representative of the population, it is important to consider that a course being easier than expected may result in success. If "Easier" is counted in the same category as "Same" than 79% of students were more likely to be successful by having their expectations met or by having them unmet with the course being easier. While this might be the case, it is also necessary to consider that all three unsuccessful students had their expectations met by the course difficulty. This result might suggest that while course difficulty is important to consider, it is not the only obstacle or may not be the only important obstacle.

### 5.4.3 Outliers

The three unsuccessful students who completed the interview all had their expectations met by the courses' difficulty. The difficulty expected and reported was all across the board, but interestingly, the student that expected to exert significant effort (NAS1614) expected and reported the course to be Easy, the student expecting average effort (NAS1618) expected and reported the course to be Somewhat Easy, and the student who expected to put in Maximum effort (NAS1627) expected and reported the course to be Somewhat Difficult (see Table 5.12).

<sup>31</sup> This test was run because it is intended for multinomial variables that are not normally distributed and come from small samples. It tests to see if an independent variable can predict a dependent variable.

Table 5.12

*Outliers: Expected Difficulty and Effort and Reported Difficulty*

Student	Expected Difficulty	Expected Effort	Reported Difficulty
NAS1614	Easy	Significant	Easy
NAS1618	Somewhat Easy	Average	Somewhat Easy
NAS1627	Somewhat Difficult	Maximum	Somewhat Difficult

The data from students NAS1618 and NAS1627 align with the data from student definitions of difficulty reported in the questionnaire and analyzed earlier in this chapter in that having to put in more effort makes a course more difficult.

Only two students reported the course being more difficult than expected. Both students (NAS1606 and NAS1630) passed the course with a *B* or better. They both also expected to put in Maximum effort into coursework. While student expectations of difficulty did not align with the expected effort, the difficulty they encountered did, which supports the student-produced definitions of difficulty discussed earlier.

#### **5.4.4 Effort and Difficulty Discussion**

In the analysis of responses to the questionnaire items concerning difficulty, it was found that students thought that a heavier workload was one factor that made a class more difficult. This finding aligns with current retention research (Moore, et al., 2003). The analysis of the questionnaire responses also revealed that 90% of students expected to put in significant to maximum effort. When testing whether or not these expectations were met, 43% of the successful students reported that the course was the same difficulty and 36% of successful students reported the course was easier than expected. The results from the communication chapter and of this chapter so far suggest that there was a lighter workload required by the

courses themselves because less participation was required. While there were no statistically significant results, the lighter workload and less perceived time spent may align with the changes in reported difficulty because 79% of the successful students had expectations met or were required to do less than expected. Students also defined difficulty by how the instructor interacts with the course. This result aligns with previous research (Herbert, 2006; Morris & Finnegan, 2009), and may also be related to the reported increase in instructor communication frequency that was noted in Chapter 4.

### 5.5 Learning

Item 14 of the questionnaire asked students what they expected to learn about writing. The responses fell into one of four categories: Improving Writing in General, Improving Specific Basic Writing Skills, Writing as Subject, and Self-Improvement (see Table 5.13). Most students identified improving their writing as something they expected to learn in the course. There were 20 statements that indicated the expectation of improving writing in general. This category was built from the codes *improve writing*, *better writer*, *write better*, and *writing tips/techniques*. There were 20 statements that indicated the expectation of learning about specific writing skills. This category was built from the codes *write clearly/concisely*, *structure*, *stay on topic*, *improve vocabulary*, *improve grammar*, *target an audience*, *improve punctuation*, and *engage an audience*.

Writing as Subject was another category that the responses formed. There were 20 statements that indicated students expected to learn about the subject of writing, and this category was built from the codes *styles*, *writing tools*, *types of writing*, *analysis*, *conduct research*, *apply research*, *citations*, and *general knowledge*. The difference between this category and Improving

Specific Skills is that the previous category focused on building specific writing skills for writing in general, while these focused on skills necessary in specific types of writing.

Self-improvement is the final broad category discovered in the responses to this question. Though some of these statements could be arguably placed under Improving Writing, these 13 statements identified personal goals related to self-expression or growth that were more specific to “how” they were going to improve. This category was built from the codes *strengths and weaknesses*, *voice*, *use previous knowledge*, *practice*, *articulate thoughts*, and *critical thinking*.

Interestingly, across all three categories, four students referenced bringing their work to the “next” or “college” level. Finally, though it was only one student, someone did respond with “Not a thing.” Again, most students provided more than one skill or “item” they expected to learn, so these numbers do not add up to the specific number of students who responded (see Table 5.13).

Table 5.13

*Expected Learning Outcomes*

Category	Codes	Example Responses
Improve Writing in General	<i>Improve writing, better writer, write better</i>	“to better compose my writing” (NAS1603) “further my writing skills” (NAS1609) “successfully write at the college level” (NAS1630) “become a good writer” (NAS1625) “improve my writing” (NAS1622)
Improve Specific Basic Writing Skills	<i>Writer clearly and concisely, structure, stay on topic, improve vocabulary, improve grammar, target an audience, improve punctuation, engage an audience</i>	“write clearly” (NAS1636) “improve my grammar” (NAS1620) “how to organize” (NAS1613) “draw readers into my work” (NAS16Inc1) “keep them engaged” (NAS16Inc2) “Learn ways to structure essays” (NAS1603)

Table 5.13 Continued

Category	Codes	Example Responses
Writing as Subject	<i>Styles, types of writing, analysis, conduct research, apply research, citations</i>	“how to research on a higher level. . . how to apply that research” (NAS1608) “How to write professionally” (NAS1605) “how to write a cause and effect paper” (NAS1606) “different areas of writing” (NAS1626) “learn more about writing in general” (NAS16NC1)
Self-Improvement	<i>strengths/weaknesses, voice, use previous knowledge, practice, articulate thoughts, critical thinking</i>	“how to have a stronger voice” (NAS1629) “better articulate my thoughts” (NAS1634) “find out my writing strengths” (NAS1625) “how to apply and add in more to what I learned from previous english [sic] classes” (NAS1627) “communicate my voice” (NAS1604)

The categories that involve what students expected to learn about writing are not surprising. It was a little disappointing to see that students are still identifying styles like “cause and effect” as what they would specifically learn about writing, but it was overall encouraging that students were expecting to improve. The self-improvement category was not exactly expected, but does align with some of the retention literature that focuses on student internal motivation as an indicator of student success (Friedman & Mandel, 2011). Whether or not the students who identified a self-improvement reason were successful will be discussed later in this chapter.

### 5.5.1 Meeting Expectations

In order to determine whether or not students were learning what they expected to learn, one of the interview questions asked if this expectation was met and what they expected. This

question was open-ended, and so it was first coded for *Yes* and *No* responses. It was found that, of the 17 students, 13 learned what they expected to and four did not. Next, the learning outcomes stated by the students in the interview were provisional coded using the expected learning codes generated from the questionnaire. Because not all of the responses fit nicely and neatly into these codes, the remaining data was then coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding.

There were two students who did not learn what they expected and cited poor performance and course-withdraw as the cause. There were also two students who did not learn what they expected and indicated course content as the problem. Of these two, one student (NAS1615) who did not learn what was expected indicated that more writing was expected. The other (NAS1635) indicated that learning to write clearly and concisely was expected. This student went on to note that, instead, the course focused on formatting. There were three students who indicated that they expected to and did improve their writing in general. There were five students who indicated, in eight statements, that they expected and did learn about writing as a subject. There were also two students who indicated that they learned more about basic writing skills. In addition to these categories pulled from the questionnaire analysis, a category called Unexpected Event surfaced from students who said they learned what they expected, but then expressed surprise at what they learned. There were three students, in four statements, who indicated some sort of “surprise.” Finally, one student indicated that not much was expected (see Table 5.14).

Table 5.14

*Meeting Learning Expectations*

Met Category	Category	Codes	Student Response Examples
No	Non-attendance	<i>Performance, Withdraw</i>	"I could have, but I didn't because of my poor performance" (NAS1627) "Dropped the course" (NAS1614)
	Course Content	<i>Not enough writing, too much focus on formatting</i>	"I was expecting a writing course, but I got a history course" (NAS1615) "I wanted to get my point across in a more clear and concise manner. . . focused more on formatting issues"(NAS1635)
	Improve writing	<i>Improve writing skills, sharpen writing skills,</i>	"how to improve my writing skills" (NAS1604) "I expected to sharpen my writing skills, and I did" (NAS1619)
Yes	Writing As Subject	<i>Style, form arguments, citations, tips and techniques, analysis, subject of writing, syllabus</i>	"I see an improvement in my writing style and writing preparation." (NAS1604) "form arguments" (NAS1613) "mla[sic] works cited, writing strategies, writing techniques" (NAS1630) "analytical aspect of research. . .how to make sources relevant" (NAS1631) "I learned more about writing" (NAS1624) "Expecting to learn what was outlined in the course syllabus" (NAS1618)
	Improve specific skills	<i>Grammar, effectively communicate</i>	"I was able to learn more about grammar" (NAS1601) "how to effectively communicate" (NAS1624)
Both	Unexpected Event	<i>Positive Surprise, Negative Surprise</i>	"but I was expected to learn about research at the beginning of the semester. . .because research papers take a while to write" (NAS1606) "but never expected to learn more into this course" NAS1623)



When comparing the codes produced by individual responses in the interview to the codes produced by the expectations identified in the questionnaire, it was found that half of these responses were in line with previously identified expectations exactly. The other half either only reported one of the codes they had expected in the questionnaire or went into more depth. For example, two students listed Improve Writing in the questionnaire, but listed more specific ways to do that, which fell into Writing as Subject and Self-Improvement in the interview.

Interestingly, both the questionnaire and the interview resulted in one response that indicated that the student did not expect to learn anything. Surprisingly, this result was from two different students. The student who indicated not expecting to learn much in the questionnaire (NAS1614) reported in the interview that the course was dropped. The student who reported not expecting to learn much from the course in the interview (NAS1628) indicated that they expected to learn to improve writing and learn about writing as a subject in the questionnaire responses. It is possible that the student who did not expect to learn much was already starting the course with negative assumptions about the course. This assumption may have led to dropping the course as the literature suggests attitude impacts retention (Ames & Archer, 1988; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Campbell & Mislevy, 2012; Friedman & Mandel, 2011; Roberts & Styron, 2006). It is possible that the student who had specific expectations did not have them met to the fullest capacity or did not perform the way they expected to, which impacted the reported learning. This possibility will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Overall it seems that most student expectations regarding what they would be learning about were met. Notably, two of the students who indicated that they did not learn what they expected were also students who did not finish the course, but the other two were successful.

### 5.5.2 Expectations and Success

Whether or not learning expectations were met was measured two ways in the previous section: by comparing codes from the questionnaire and the interview and by considering the students' responses to directly being asked if they learned what they expected. This section will use the students' responses of "Yes" or "No" (regardless of implicit or explicit responses) to consider whether or not this impacted final grades because, in this study, the student perception is the focus. This expectation resulted in 76% of students who were successful and reported learning what they expected, 6% (one student) was successful but did not learn what was expected, 6% (one student) was unsuccessful but learned what was expected, and 12% were unsuccessful and did not learn what they expected to learn (see Table 5.15).

Table 5.15

*Meeting Learning Expectations and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Yes	13	1
No	1	2

A Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test<sup>32</sup> resulted in a value of .200 with a significance of  $p=.561$ , which indicates that the value is not statistically significant. This result means that there is no significant predictive relationship between learning expectations being met and success in the course. Again, a statistically insignificant result means that it cannot be applied to the population. However, considering that the majority of unsuccessful students did not have

<sup>32</sup> This was run because it tests to see if an independent variable can predict a dependent variable. It is intended for non normally distributed data and small sample sizes.

their expectations met and the majority of successful students did have their expectations met, it might be the small sample size that resulted in this statistical value.

### 5.5.3 Outliers

There were three unsuccessful students who were interviewed, and two of them, as noted above, did not have their expectations met. One of these students (NAS1614) did not expect to learn much and the other (NAS1627) expected to learn some sort of self-improvement, but both withdrew from the course. The third interviewee (NAS1618) felt that learning expectations were met and that they learned about writing as a subject (see Table 5.16).

Table 5.16

*Outliers: Learning Expectations*

Student Code	Learning Expectation	Expectation Met	What was Learned
NAS1614	Not Much, Writing as Subject	No	Dropped
NAS1617	Improve Writing in General	Not Interviewed	Not Interviewed
NAS1618	Self-Improvement, Improving Writing in General, Writing as Subject	Yes	Writing as Subject
NAS1627	Self-Improvement	No	Poor Performance
NAS1636	Improve Writing in General, Improve Specific Basic Writing Skills	Not Interviewed	Not interviewed

One student who was successful and did not have expectations met (NAS1635) expected to learn to improve grammar and reported not learning about grammar. This student earned an *A* in the course. The other student who was successful and did not have expectations met (NAS1615) earned a *B* in the course and reported expecting to write more.

#### **5.5.4 Learning Discussion**

Overall, student-learning expectations seem to be met by the course as the majority of students claimed that expectations were met in the interview. There were, however, four students who did not have their expectations met. Half of these students were unsuccessful, while the other half did well in the course. It does not appear that learning expectations being met or unmet impacted success. The two unsuccessful students who did not have expectations met indicated that it was due to being unsuccessful in the course (they dropped the course or did not perform well). The third unsuccessful student did have expectations met. This finding would suggest that Powell's assertion that students may be learning what they need to learn despite dropping out likely is not the case for the majority (2015), but might be the case for some students.

#### **5.6 Participation Expectations and Success Discussion**

While course length did impact expected time spent per week, students were still not expecting to spend or reporting that they spent the amount of time the college expected based on course length. Students were also logging fewer hours in Blackboard than they expected despite logging in more times than expected. This might suggest that students were quickly logging into the course to check something or were getting kicked out frequently. The fact that all of the successful students logged in more might also suggest that being persistent is a key factor to success (though not asked, the unsuccessful students may have given up if faced with technology trouble). Additionally, 82% of students were required by their courses to participate less frequently than they reported expecting in the questionnaire.

Overall, while many expectations were not met in this chapter, most of them indicated that less work was required for the student. This finding might, despite no statistical significance, suggest that there is a connection between expectations and success simply because most

students (82%) also were successful. Considering that “amount of work” was noted as a factor in course difficulty in the questionnaire, it is not surprising that so many students were met with less work and successful. This finding also aligns with some successful students reporting the class to be easier in the interview than they expected in the questionnaire. While there was no statistical significance between met expectations and success overall, notably, 79% of students indicated that the course was easier or the same as they expected.

Considering that 42% of students indicated that the “Course” as a difficulty factor, and that there was a statistically significant drop from the peer communication frequency expected and reported in Chapter 4, the fact that the course itself is requiring less work might have been a factor in the 82% success rate for the Spring 2016 semester. Instructor interaction was also identified as a key feature in whether or not a course was difficult as reported by the students in the questionnaire, and there was an increase, though not statistically significant, in the reported instructor interaction in Chapter 4. It is possible that this was because students were struggling as some indicated in the questionnaire that they would contact instructors when they were struggling. However, there may be other reasons for more contact. For example, increased instructor communication might be the result of active instructors. As noted in Chapter 4, more research would be necessary.

## CHAPTER 6

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONLINE COURSE EXPECTATIONS AND SUCCESS

#### 6.1 Summary of Results

##### 6.1.1 Expectations and Success

The responses to the questionnaire items that specifically asked students about their expectations concerning the online nature of the course and where they gained their knowledge suggest that a large number of students take these courses because of other responsibilities and many of them have past experience with online courses. This finding sets up an interesting contradiction as previous studies suggest that other responsibilities decrease the retention of online students, but experience with online courses increases the retention of online students. The data used to evaluate whether or not expectations were met comes from both Blackboard data and the interview data.

#### 6.2 Why Online?

Question five of the questionnaire asked students why they took the course online. These open-ended responses were coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding. They were then grouped into three categories: Time Constraints, Academic Reasons, and Geographic Reasons (see Table 6.1). Time constraints were noted by 18 students, and these constraints included comments about *working full time*, *family responsibilities*, *general scheduling issues*, and *general overload of responsibilities*. Of all these constraints, working full time or a demanding job was by far the most common response and was noted by 12 students as the reason for taking the course online. Of those 12, only one specifically indicated financial reasons for working while in school. Academic reasons were noted by 10 students, and these reasons included the *subject* (being “good” at English) or the *content* (course catalog description), the *professor*,

*degree requirements* (flexibility for more classes and the course itself being required), and *grade improvement*. Interestingly, across the two categories, six students indicated that the online course was “easier” because of time constraints or academic reasons. Finally, three students indicated geographical reasons for taking the course online. One student indicated that they were not physically close enough to attend classes, and the other two noted that they were more comfortable taking a writing course online. Because some students listed more than one reason, there is not a “total number” of students listed here.

Table 6.1

*Reasons for Taking Online*

Reason Categories	Codes	Student Example Responses
Time Constraints	<i>working full time, family responsibilities, general scheduling issues, general overload of responsibilities</i>	“I work 40 hours a week. . .” (NAS1629) “I would need to travel from the home to the class on site.” (NAS1632) “Not enough time in my schedule.” (NAS1634) “I have 3 kids.” (NAS1623) “. . .help my mom financially. . .” (NAS1621) “I am a single mom. . .” (NAS1613) “. . .an online course would fit my schedule more easily.” (NAS1612)
Academic	<i>The academic subject, the content, the professor, degree requirements (flexibility for more classes and the course itself being required), grade improvement</i>	“I got a D the first time. . .” (NAS1633) “. . .it is required for the degree I am pursuing. . .” (NAS1636) “I may take more classes. . .” (NAS1620) “. . .easier online than other subjects. . .” (NAS1616) “The description. . .had the course as centered around the rap lyrics of tupac and biggie.” (NAS1630) “. . .the professor is great!” (NAS1631) “I felt that I could take charge of my writing composition development remotely.” (NAS1604)
Geographic	<i>Physical proximity to campus, More comfortable at home</i>	“I have some familiarity with . . . online courses” (NAS1632) “I feel. . .more comfortable writing at home. . .” (NAS1631) “. . . not located near campus.” (NAS1614)

Having multiple responsibilities, that create time and flexibility issues, was not a surprising result as it is common in both the community college and retention literature (Barnes & Piland, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008; Mamisheishvili & Deggs, 2013; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Rovai, 2003; Torres, et al., 2010).

### 6.2.1 Expectations and Success

In order to determine whether or not reasons for taking online courses impacted success, I created a table with the categories from the questionnaire responses and the coordinating success of each student (see Table 6.2). Most students who were successful indicated time constraints and academic reasons for taking the online class. The unsuccessful students primarily noted time constraints, but one indicated academic and one indicated geographic reasons.

Table 6.2

*Reasons for Taking the Course Online and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Time	15	4
Academic	10	1
Geographic	3	1

I then ran a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test<sup>33</sup> to determine if any of the reasons listed for taking the course online could predict success. The result of the test was 0 and so was not statistically significant. This finding suggests that the reason why students took the class could not predict whether or not they would be successful. This might be because the sample size is small and there were so few unsuccessful students.

<sup>33</sup> This test is intended for non-normal distributions of small sample sizes that use multinomial variables to determine whether the independent variable can predict the dependent variable.



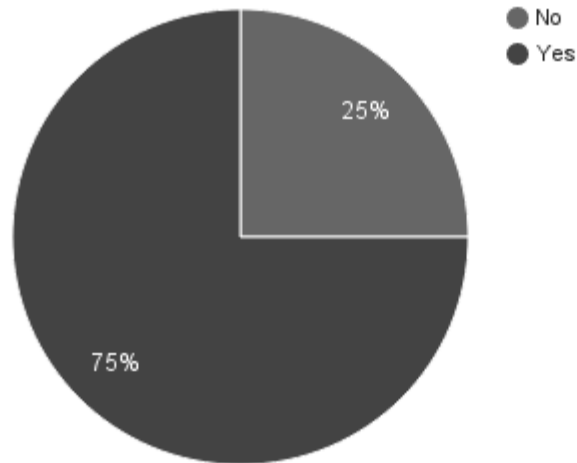
### **6.2.2 Online Reasons Discussion**

Overall, as noted above, the data from the questionnaire corroborates the literature concerning why students take online courses. These reasons, however, do not seem to be able to predict success. Interestingly, all the unsuccessful students but one indicated time constraints as an issue. However, 65% of the successful students also indicated time constraints as a reason for taking the course. While the reasons for taking the class do not impact success statistically, “time constraints” are very subjective. Everyone thinks they are busy. This area may require further research.

### **6.3 Online Versus Face-to-face**

Item 15 of the questionnaire asked if students were expecting the online experience to be different from the face-to-face course. Out of the 40 respondents, 75% (30 students) responded “Yes,” with the other 25% (10 students) responding “No” (see *Figure 6.1*).

**Do you expect the online course to be different from the face-to-face course?**



*Figure 6.1.* Do you expect the online course to be different from the face-to-face course? This chart illustrates whether or not student expected the online version of the course to be different from the face-to-face version of the course.

The follow up question, item 16, asked why or why not. Thirty-one of the students who answered, “Yes” explained why. Of those 31, one was not a useable response as the student indicated that they had never taken an in-person college class and so they just imagined it was different. The following categories were assigned to the remainder of the *Yes* responses: Responsibility, Differences in Interaction, Differences in Execution, and Personal Learning Preferences (see Table 6.3). The greatest number of student responses fell into the Differences in Execution category, with 22 statements. The codes that built this category were *clearer explanations online*, *clearer expectations online*, *more lecture face-to-face*, *no textbook online*, *self-taught online*, *less discussion online*, *less writing face-to-face*, *no peer brainstorming online*, *no Q&A online*, *more assignments online*, *different participation online*, and *different knowledge*

*source for each.* Some of this aligns with previous retention research that reports clear explanations and expectations as necessary for success (Moore, et al., 2003). The previous research also suggests that students place a lot of emphasis on instructor interaction (Herbert, 2006; Morris & Finnegan, 2009). Feeling self-taught without question and answer sessions and less lecture may impact retention.

The next, most common, category was Differences in Interaction with 14 statements citing interaction as a difference between online and face-to-face courses. This category was built from the codes *face-to-face more interactive*, *online less instructor interaction*, *face-to-face more social interaction*, *online different communication medium*, and *online less personal*. This category is obviously connected to the previous category and corroborates the literature that suggests that community building, social interaction, and instructor interaction are valuable factors in retention (Gayton, 2013; Herbert, 2006; Morris & Finnegan, 2005; Moore, et al., 2003; Nash, 2005; Rovai, 2003).

The third category was Personal Learning Preferences, and there were 11 statements indicating these preferences as the reason for the differences between online and face-to-face. This category was built from the codes *less distraction online*, *visual learner online*, *less stress online*, *own pace online*, *easy subjects online*, and *face-to-face boring*. This category is different from the Differences in Execution category because, though some of them have to do with the execution of the course, whether or not they are a problem is dependent on the student's preferences. The final "Yes" category, with seven statements, was Responsibility. This category was built from the codes *more accountable online*, *more independent online*, and *more responsible online*. This last category also corroborates previous retention literature that indicates that intrinsic motivation as an important marker for retention (Friedman & Mandel, 2011).

Table 6.3

*“Yes” Reasons for Differences between Online and Face-to-Face Courses*

Categories	Codes	Student Response Examples
Differences in Execution	<i>Clearer explanations online, clearer expectations online, more lecture face-to-face, no text online, self-taught online, less discussion online, less writing face-to-face, no peer brainstorming online, no Q&amp;A online, more assignments online, different participation online, different knowledge source for each</i>	<p>“I am not able to participate online as when I participate in class” (NAS1603) “online. . .we have more assignments to complete” (NAS1605) “I believe you get more actual knowledge from a professor whereas online you are really learning from videos and texts” (NAS1608) “I feel like an online class is a lot more of having to understanding things and interpret them. . .rather than listening to a lecture” (NAS1612) “[online] things will be explained clearly and a clear understanding of what is expected” (NAS1628) “In person. . .less writing during the period” (NAS1635) “no peer brainstorming” (NAS1636) “you aren’t sitting in front of the teacher listening to them teach you are given the material, and you figure it out for yourself” (NAS1626)</p>
Differences in Interaction	<i>face-to-face more interactive, online less instructor interaction, face-to-face more social interaction, online different communication medium, online less personal</i>	<p>“I feel like face to face class will be much more interactive than online class” (NAS1627) “Lack of human interaction is a limitation to learning” (NAS1618) “I won’t be able to socialize with classmates as often as in person” (NAS1615) “you don’t have the interaction with your professor directly and you won’t make new friends” (NAS1606)</p>
Preferences	<i>online less distraction, online visual learner, online less stress, online own pace, online easy subjects, and face-to-face boring</i>	<p>“because if the class is boring I tend to fall asleep so its better that I take online”(NAS16Inc1) “if you aren’t confident with the course, you should do it face-to-face” (NAS1609) “online you can complete at your own pace” (NAS1611) “I get too distracted in the classroom” (NAS1624) “I’m a visual learner” (NAS1617)</p>

Table 6.3 Continued

Categories	Codes	Student Response Examples
Responsibility	<i>online more accountable, online more independent, online more responsible</i>	<p>“I feel like the classroom environments ask you to depend on your instructor before yourself. I feel much more accountable for my work this way” (NAS1631)</p> <p>“Online allows for more independence” (NAS1634) “You are much more responsible for getting your work done” (NAS1622)</p>

Some retention literature suggests that students expect to be denied something that they would have access to in a face-to-face class (Nguyen & Zang, 2011). This is apparent in the results in Table 6.3 as many students indicated that the differences between online and face-to-face result in a lack in the online course. While coding these responses, a trend emerged suggesting that some students had a decidedly negative attitude toward online courses because of these differences and some had a decidedly positive attitude toward online courses because of the differences they established. Therefore, the data was coded again using values coding (Saldaña, 2016). From those who responded with “Yes” (31 total), there were seven students who indicated that the online differences were positive. Three of those students referenced “time” and specifically indicated that face-to-face was a waste of time. These positive differences were apparent in students’ indication of time being wasted, of online being more effective, online allowing you to push yourself harder, going at your own pace online, and being more accountable for your learning online. There were six students who viewed the differences negatively; one referenced taking more time to complete assignments online, and the remainder indicated that the lack of interaction was a negative difference (see Table 6.4).

Table 6.4

*Attitudes toward Differences between Online and Face-to-Face*

Attitude Categories	Codes	Student Response Examples
Positive	<i>Waste time, own pace, positive view of accountability, positive view of hard work, more effective</i>	“In person, it’s more teacher giving instructions. . .this is a waste of time” (NAS1635) “it is easier online” (NAS1624) “I want to experience pushing myself to work harder” (NAS1621) “[f2f] asks you to depend on your instructor before yourself. I feel more accountable this [online]way” (NAS1631) “Online classes. . .are much more effective” (NAS1611)
Negative	<i>Lack of socializing, negative view of accountability</i>	“the ELI students need to invest more time into studies” (NAS1626) “I prefer the social interaction between classmates to be in person” (NAS1616) “When you take classes face to face you can see the professors expression” (NAS1608) “No. . .sessions which can bring up points you may not have thought about” (NAS1636)

Previous retention literature suggests that student attitude can significantly impact whether or not students are retained (Ames & Archer, 1988; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Campbell & Mislevy, 2012; Friedman & Mandel, 2011; Roberts & Styron, 2006). If this suggestion is true, then those who indicate a negative attitude toward the differences between online and face-to-face courses may be at risk for dropout.

Of the students who responded “No” in the previous question, five provided a “why.” There were three categories that emerged, and interestingly, two of them have some connection to the “Yes” categories (see Table 6.5). The first category is Instructor Interaction, and this category was built from just one code because there were so few students. However, two out of the five students indicated that the interaction was the same as the face-to-face courses they took. These students specifically noted that, in both situations, interaction occurred only when help

was needed. This finding contradicts the “Yes” responses that felt instructor interaction was less in the online courses. The second category was Materials. Again, this category relied on one code—*same material*. There were, again, two out of five students who indicated that the material to be learned was the same in both courses. The final category was Similar Execution. This category was noted by three out of the five students and was built from the code *same execution*. Interestingly, all students indicated that it was the subject itself (writing or English) that made the execution similar.

Table 6.5

*“No” Reasons for No Differences between Online and Face-to-Face Courses*

Category	Codes	Student Response Examples
Instructor Interaction	<i>Same instructor Interaction</i>	<p>“there wasn’t much interaction between us unless we had a question” (NAS1629) “My communication and interaction with the professors was almost none. The only time I ever spoke to the professors is when I had scheduled office visits for help” (NAS1623)</p> <p>*both in reference to previous face-to-face classes</p>
Materials	<i>Same Materials</i>	<p>“Whether in person or online, the material has to be practiced and reviewed” (NAS1619) “I think the general lessons and ideas are the same” (NAS1613)</p>
Execution	<i>Same Subject, Same execution, Writing work with ELI</i>	<p>“and executed similarly with English” (NAS1613) “Whether in person or online, the material has to be practiced and reviewed” (NAS1619) “the class covers writing and having the writing critiqued-perfect for the eli format” (NAS1630)</p>

Some retention literature suggests that if students are expecting an online course to be similar to a face-to-face course than they are bound to be unsuccessful (LeBay & Comm, 2011).

Whether or not this is the case will be discussed in the success section of this portion of the chapter.

### **6.3.1 Meeting Expectations**

The data in this section comes primarily from the interview question that asked students what they felt were the similarities and differences between online and face-to-face courses. The question was coded first using provisional coding, which, in this case, were the already established codes from the questionnaire question that asked why students did or did not think that the online course would be similar to the face-to-face course. Then, the remaining statements were coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding, and then categorized. Eight students, in nine statements, indicated interaction as a difference between online and face-to-face. Five students identified a personal learning preference as a difference. Two students indicated that the difference was in execution and it resulted in being “self-taught.” Of the seven students who identified a similarity, six of those identified course requirements/materials as that similarity. The seventh student identified instructor activity as a similarity. Of the 10 students who did not identify a similarity, only two specifically indicated that they did not see a similarity (see Table 6.6).



Table 6.6

*Similarities/Differences Between Online and Face-to-Face*

	Category	Codes	Student Response Examples
Differences	Differences in Interaction	<i>instructor interaction, feedback, classmate interaction, collaboration, no contact</i>	“difficult to ask the professor questions” (NAS1619) “I wasn’t expecting to have a teacher so quick to answer my emails” (NAS1623) “I don’t know if I got enough criticism to really better my writing” (NAS1628) “I didn’t have to wait for office
	Differences in Interaction	<i>instructor interaction, feedback, classmate interaction, collaboration, no contact</i>	hours to get questions answered” (NAS1630) “couldn’t make that colleague connection” (NAS1631) “there was a lack of cross talk” (NAS1624)
Differences	Personal Learning Preferences	<i>own pace, face-to-face feedback</i>	“we were able to work on our own pace” (NAS1605) “I learn best when writing face-to-face and I can get feedback” (NAS1606) “I enjoyed working on my own time” (NAS1613) “Online gave me more time to focus and reread more difficult subject matters”(NAS1635)
	Differences in Execution	<i>self-taught</i>	“I had to make sure I understood my teacher the first time around” (NAS1614) “I had to learn the assignments by myself” (NAS1601)

Table 6.6 Continued

	Category	Codes	Student Response Examples
Similarities	Same Materials or Requirements	<i>workload, assignments, requirements</i>	“The assignments seemed like they were similar” (NAS1630) “The coursework provided was similar to a traditional course” (NAS1624) “The workload was the same” (NAS1601) “Peer revision made it similar” (NAS1604) “Similar assignments and exams”(NAS1618)
	Interaction	<i>instructor interaction</i>	“The course was similar because...the professor is extremely active with the class and responds to emails promptly” (NAS1631)
	None	<i>no similarity</i>	“The only similarity is that there is a teacher and students.” (NAS1615) “I don’t think it was really similar” (NAS1614)

After the responses were coded for similarities and differences, they were coded for positivity and negativity. Positivity and negativity were determined by first coding for positive and negative attitude using the codes generated in Chapter 4, then by coding the remaining statements by using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding. Of the eight students who reported interaction as a difference between online and face-to-face, three indicated that this difference was a positive one while the rest saw the difference as a negative. Of the five students who identified a personal learning preference as a difference, four identified being able to work at their own pace and identified this as a positive outcome. The fifth noted preferring face-to-face feedback and saw not getting this as a negative outcome. Both students who indicated that being

self-taught was a difference in execution of the course felt that it is a negative difference. The students did not appear to assign positive or negative associations with the noted similarities except for the student (NAS1631) who identified instructor interaction as a similarity and the student (NAS1615) who noted that the only similarity was there being a teacher and students. The student who identified instructor interaction as similar was positive about the experience, while the other was negative (see Table 6.7).

Table 6.7

*Attitude Toward Online Courses in Interview*

Attitude	Codes	Student Response Examples
Positive toward Differences	<i>accountability, own pace, enjoyed, more, better, instructor availability, f2f negative</i>	<p>“I felt more excited by the idea of impressing. . .myself” (NAS1604) “I think the course was better online. . .because we were able to work at our own pace” (NAS1605) “I wasn’t expecting to have a teacher who was so quick to respond to my emails” (NAS1623) “face-to-face might have been harder for me” (NAS1630) “face-to-face might have negatively impacted my performance” (NAS1635)</p>
Negative toward Differences	<i>harder, less improvement, less contact, less feedback</i>	<p>“had to learn the assignments by myself, made it harder” (NAS1601) “when it’s face-to-face. . .I can get feedback about my writing from the teacher” (NAS1606) “missing that human contact” (NAS1618)</p> <p>“I don’t really know if I got enough criticism that helped me become a better writer” (NAS1628)</p>
Positive toward Similarities	<i>interaction</i>	<p>“Peer-revision made the online writing course similar to face-to-face” (NAS1604) “The professor is extremely active” (NAS1631)</p>
Negative toward No Similarities	<i>by omission, negative toward differences</i>	<p>“There are instructors and students” (NAS1615) “I don’t think it was really similar, I had to make sure I understood my teacher the first time around” (NAS1614)</p>

In order to determine whether or not these results show that student expectations were met, these responses were then compared to the responses to the questionnaire prompt that asked why students thought online and face-to-face classes were similar or different. To do this, the codes that resulted from the online versus face-to-face data and the attitude codes that emerged from the interview were compared to the codes that emerged from the questionnaire responses regarding online versus face-to-face. First, the responses were labeled for changes in attitude and then for changes in coded similarities and differences.

One student (6%) changed their attitude about online courses from positive to negative. This student's (NAS1601) open responses resulted in the same codes before and after the course. This suggests that expectations may have been met. There were five students (29%) that changed attitude from no clear attitude to positive attitude. Of these five students, three responses resulted in the same or similar codes<sup>34</sup>. One of those students expected similarities in execution, and those expectations were met, but this student also added that the differences in interaction were positive. Interestingly, one student (NAS1623) indicated in the questionnaire that they expected the instructor interaction to be the same, but suggested that face-to-face instructors were not easy to get in touch with and were inactive. In the interview, this student indicated that expectations were exceeded, found the interactions to be different, and so had a positive attitude in the end.

There were three students (18%) who did not have a clear attitude in the questionnaire, but who had a negative attitude in the interview. One of these students (NAS1631) indicated that they expected similar material and execution, but the differences in interaction caused their

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<sup>34</sup> Similar codes are those that may have fit into the original code, but were more specific. For example, a code in the questionnaire might be differences in execution and in the interview the code resulted in personal preferences because the student identified a specific execution as a personal preference.

attitude to shift toward a negative one. Two students indicated the same codes (*differences in interaction*) both in the questionnaire and the interview.

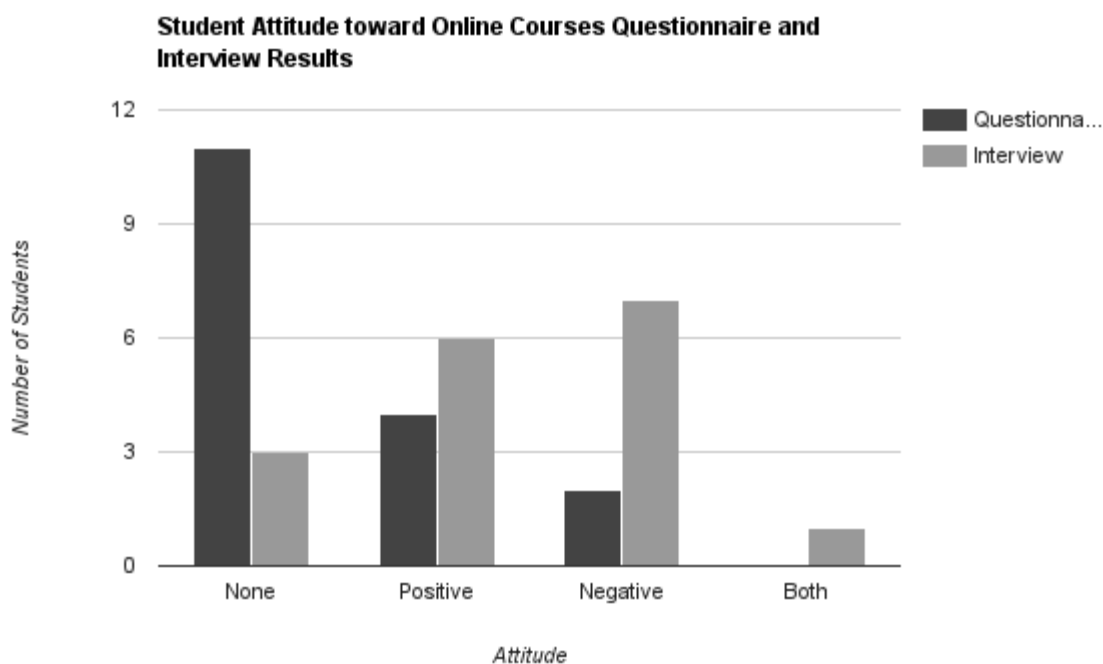
One student (6%) seemed to have a positive attitude in both the questionnaire and the interview and had similar codes, and there were two students (12%) who had a negative attitude in both the questionnaire and the interview. For one student (NAS1618), the codes were the same, and for the other student (NAS1615) codes changed from *differences in interaction* to *no similarities*. Two students (12%) indicated no attitude both in the questionnaire and in the interview. For one student (NAS1607), this was because the student did not have experience with face-to-face courses and did not want to hazard a guess. The other student (NAS1627) indicated that they expected there to be a difference in interactions and reported that both online and face-to-face have the same materials.

One student (6%) (NAS1631) indicated a positive attitude in the questionnaire suggesting differences in responsibility between the two platforms, and this student also, in the interview, assigned a positive attitude toward the similarities in instructor interaction and a negative one toward the differences in classmate interaction. Finally, one student (6%) (NAS1624) changed attitude from positive to no clear attitude. This student indicated personal preferences in the questionnaire and differences in interaction in the interview.

There were four students who indicated in the questionnaire that they did not feel like there was a difference between online and face-to-face. Of these four, three students had a more positive attitude in the interview and one had a negative attitude.

Attitude toward online courses is important because attitudes can impact student performance in any course (Ames & Archer, 1988; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Campbell & Mislevy, 2012; Friedman & Mandel, 2011; Roberts & Styron, 2006). These results suggest that

while some students in these courses have a positive attitude toward online learning (35%), a good deal (41%) do not. This shift in attitude toward online courses between the questionnaire responses and the interview responses suggests that a good number of students are having a negative experience (see *Figure 6.2*).

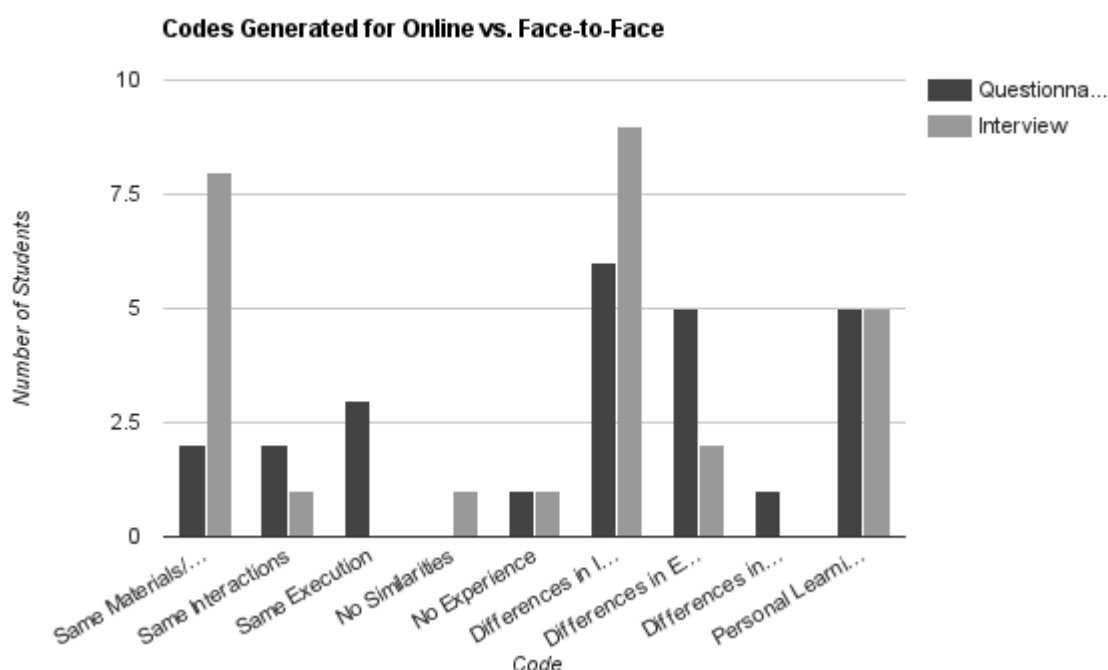


*Figure 6.2.* Student Attitude toward Online Courses Questionnaire and Interview Results. This graph illustrates the changes in attitude from the questionnaire to interview results.

It is important to consider, however, that out of the seven students who seemed to have a negative attitude in the interview, four of those students had a clear change of attitude from the questionnaire to the interview. On the other hand, five students (29%) had a clear change to a positive attitude between the questionnaire and the interview. That said, nine students (53%) seem to have had a clear shift in attitude from the beginning to the end of the semester. Because

attitude can be influenced by experience (Nguyen & Zhang, 2011), this suggests that student expectations for 53% of those interviewed were not met.

When considering what students chose to identify as similarities and differences at the beginning of the semester in the questionnaire and at the end of the semester in the interview, a visual comparison helps identify some overall changes (see *Figure 6.3*).



*Figure 6.3.* Codes Generated for Online vs. Face-to-Face. This graph illustrates the codes generated by the 17 students interviewed on their questionnaire and interview responses.

There were significant increases in the Same Materials or Requirements code, but the interview question did ask for both similarities and differences. This seemed to be the prominent similarity. There was also an increase in the code Differences in Interaction. As discussed earlier, in some cases this was positive, and in some it was not. Otherwise, student expectations seem to be met for the remaining 47% of students.

### 6.3.2 Expectations and Success

When comparing the expected and reported similarities and differences between online courses and face-to-face courses, meeting expectations clearly does not impact success. Over half of the interviewed students who provided responses that could be coded for differences and similarities between the two platforms did not have their expectations met and, yet, were successful. However, as discussed above, this result was largely because many students were “pleasantly surprised” by their experience in the online course. The following table (Table 6.8) cross-tabulates whether or not expectations were met by comparing met expectations to students’ coordinating success.

Table 6.8

*Met Expectations of Online Courses and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Yes	4	2
No	8	1

An interesting development is that both unsuccessful students who had their expectations met honed in on negative differences between online and face-to-face courses. One of these students (NAS1618) began with a negative attitude and ended with a negative attitude, while the other (NAS1627) began with no clear attitude but ended with a negative attitude toward online courses. For the successful students, over half either improved their attitudes toward online



courses or maintained positive attitudes through the end. Table 6.9 shows the shift in attitude<sup>35</sup> and the coordinating success.

Table 6.9

*Shift in Attitude and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Up	5	0
Same	3	2
Down	3	1

These results are interesting because of the impact that attitude can have on a student's performance (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Nguyen & Zhang, 2011; Roberts & Styron, 2006). These results suggest that the unsuccessful students are both coming in with negative expectations and having a negative experience overall.

### 6.3.3 Outliers

When considering student assumptions of similarities and differences between online and face-to-face classes and their attitudes toward the online platform, two of the unsuccessful students implied that communication with the instructor was limited, saying that they were “missing that human contact. . .no ah-ha moment” (NAS1618) and “I had to make sure I understood my teacher the first time around” (NAS1614). In light of the connection between attitude and success for the unsuccessful students noted above, perceived lack of communication seems to be the reason for the negative attitude toward online learning.

<sup>35</sup> Up is positive and Down is negative.

The other attitude outlier was a student (NAS1631) who began with a positive attitude and wound up seeing both the positive and negative of online learning. However, this student indicated that the similarity was positive (the professor was actively communicative), but the difference was negative (the type of communication done with classmates). This finding, along with the previously presented data, indicates that the differences were mostly negative and suggests that this student, and many others, still consider the face-to-face course to be the gold standard by which all courses are measured.

Finally, the four students who indicated that there was no difference between online and face-to-face in the questionnaire need to be considered. As noted in the previous section, of these four, three students had a more positive attitude and one had a more negative attitude in the interview. Regardless, all four were successful.

#### **6.3.4 Online Versus Face-to-Face Discussion**

Most students expected there to be differences between online and face-to-face courses. However, despite expecting these differences, many had negative attitudes toward them. This negative attitude was especially true of those who identified interaction differences. These negative attitudes toward interaction differences held true in the interview for some students, but for others, they noted, like those who indicated that there were no differences in interaction, that these differences would be positive because they were not expecting so much feedback and communication.

While more students indicated a negative attitude toward online learning, many students also shifted from neutral or negative to positive. This shift is an important consideration because three of the students who stayed the same in their attitude began the course with negative attitudes. Like every other aspect of retention, there is likely more than one cause for being

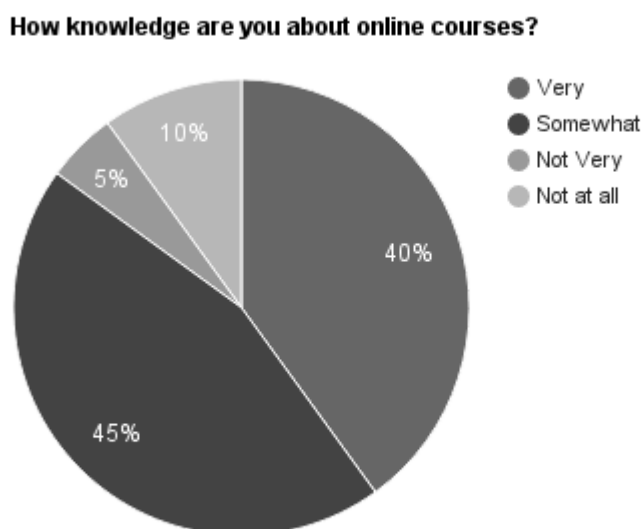
unsuccessful during the course of this study; however, none of the unsuccessful students had positive attitudes in the interview.

Overall, these results corroborate previous research that indicates the importance of instructor interaction (Herbert, 2006; Nash, 2005). There were seven different instructors in this study, so it is reasonable that some students would rave about instructor interaction and others would be disappointed by it. This number of instructors may also be the reason for perceived increases in instructor communication frequency and the reason it was not statistically significant. This possibility suggests that this study may, ideally, need to be controlled for the instructor if further research is conducted in this area. The interview results still had some responses of “self-taught.” This disconnect is an element that should be clarified in future research as well.

Finally, students also had difficulty making connections with peers according to the interview results in this chapter. This difficulty might, in fact, be the result of being required to communicate less frequently than expected as discussed in Chapter 4. This difficulty in making a connection could also be because the requirements are only academic. The fact that a student indicated the type of work done with peers was different and disappointing suggests that students are interested in the social aspects of communication with classmates.

#### **6.4 Online Knowledge and Preparation**

When asked question 17 of the questionnaire, “How much did you know about taking online classes when you enrolled?” 45% (18 students) responded that they were somewhat knowledgeable about what is involved in taking an online course, 40% (16 students responded that they were very knowledgeable), 5% (two students) responded not very knowledgeable, and 10% (four students) responded not at all knowledgeable (see *Figure 6.4*).



*Figure 6.4.* How knowledgeable are you about online courses? This chart illustrates the percentage of students who felt very, somewhat, not very or not at all knowledgeable about online courses.

The majority of students felt they were knowledgeable about online courses before enrolling, with only 15% who did not feel knowledgeable at all or not very knowledgeable. This result would indicate that students should have a good idea of what to expect in an online course, but how prepared they really are might depend on where they are getting the information.

The follow-up item on the questionnaire, question 18, asked students how/where they learned about online classes, and only 38 students responded to this question. The responses fell into one of four categories: NOVA Sources, Personal Relationships, Web Research, and Previous Personal Experience (see Table 6.10). There were seven statements that indicated that Educational Resources provided information about online courses. The codes that constructed this category were *advisor*, *orientation*, *school advertising*, and *NOVA website*. There were 16

statements that indicated that the student learned about online classes from someone they knew, and six of those statements identified that the person/people had past experience with online courses. The codes for this category were *family*, *friends*, *work*, *family experience*, and *friend experience*. The distinction between *family* or *friends* and the experiences of those individuals is that some students specifically indicated that those people in their lives had experience with online course while other students simply listed that they learned from family or friends without specifically identifying whether or not the individuals had experience with online courses.

The third category that developed was Web Research. There were seven students who indicated that they researched the web to learn about online classes. There is some overlap here as searching the NOVA website was counted for both NOVA Sources and Web Research. Web Research became its own category because less than half of the students who indicated looking online indicated the NOVA website as the place they did the research. The codes for this category were *web* and *NOVA web*. The final category was Previous Personal Experience. There were 14 students who indicated taking online courses in the past and this experience being their source of knowledge for online courses. Only one code surfaced for this category—*past personal experience*.

Table 6.10

*Source of Knowledge for Online Courses*

Categories	Codes	Student Response Examples
NOVA Sources	<i>Advisor, orientation, school advertising, NOVA website</i>	“I remember back at orientation” (NAS1629) “I most learned from advertising, news and college guidance counselors” (NAS1625) “through the counseling office”(NAS1608)

Table 6.10 Continued

Categories	Codes	Student Response Examples
NOVA Sources	<i>Advisor, orientation, school advertising, NOVA website</i>	“I remember back at orientation” (NAS1629) “I most learned from advertising, news and college guidance counselors” (NAS1625) “through the counseling office”(NAS1608)
Personal Relationships	<i>Friends, family, work, friend experience, family experience</i>	“Friends” (NAS1622) “My mother” (NAS1615) “Peers and Coworkers” (NAS16NC1) “My aunt had taken a course online”(NAS1614) “Most of my friends and colleagues have taken online courses” (NAS1616)
Web Research	<i>Web, web (NOVA)</i>	“Through online research” (NAS1623) “NOVA website” (NAS1636) “researching online” (NAS1612) “rate my professor.com” (NAS1610)
Previous Personal Experience	<i>Past personal experience</i>	“I took a few last semester” (NAS1631) “Past experience” (NAS1632) “My previous ELI courses” (NAS1626) “I’ve taken a few hybrid courses at NOVA” (NAS1617)

Past experiences have been connected to attitude by some of the retention literature (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This suggests that past personal experiences with online learning may have a significant impact on retention because attitude can impact retention (Ames & Archer, 1988; Friedman & Mandel, 2011).

#### 6.4.1 Meeting Expectations

**6.4.1.1 Preparation.** The second question in the interview that asked about online learning specifically asked if students felt prepared for the challenges of online learning. This

question was first coded for *Yes* and *No* as some students were explicit and others were not. This analysis resulted in 14 students who felt prepared and two who felt they were not. The responses were then coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding. The resulting codes were then categorized (see Table 6.11). Almost all of the responses that went beyond “Yes” and “No” elaborated by explaining what helped them get through the challenges of the course. The results revealed that eight students who felt prepared felt this way because of the course itself. Six students identified time management as either a challenge or an area in which they felt they excelled. Four students identified a previous course as an aid to being prepared, and one student indicated that they did not think preparation was needed.

Table 6.11

*Preparation for and Management of Online Challenges*

Prepared?	Challenge/Aid Categories	Codes	Student Response Examples
Yes	Course Elements	Clear directions, clear due dates, <i>no isolation from peers</i>	“how clearly the directions were presented” (NAS1613) “all the assignments were posted and the dates” (NAS1601) “I did not feel isolated from peers because of the context of the class which allowed for personal connections to be made” (NAS1604) “Having to interact with my peers made the course better” (NAS1605)
	Time Management	<i>Time management, deadline issues, schedule,</i>	“time management is something I will always need to work on” (NAS1605) “the deadlines were a little Awkward [sic] to meet” (NAS1619) “dealing with my work schedule” (NAS1624)
	Previous Course	<i>Online experience, SDV</i>	“I had previously taken an online course” (NAS1604) “I have taken many online courses.” (NAS1618) “The SDV course was a good intro to Blackboard for me”(NAS1630)

Table 6.11 Continued

Prepared?	Challenge/Aid Categories	Codes	Student Response Examples
No	Time Management	<i>More time</i>	“I feel like I could have spent more time, but it was very difficult for me to do so” (NAS1627)
	No Prep Needed	<i>Not necessary</i>	“I didn’t think I needed preparation” (NAS1614)

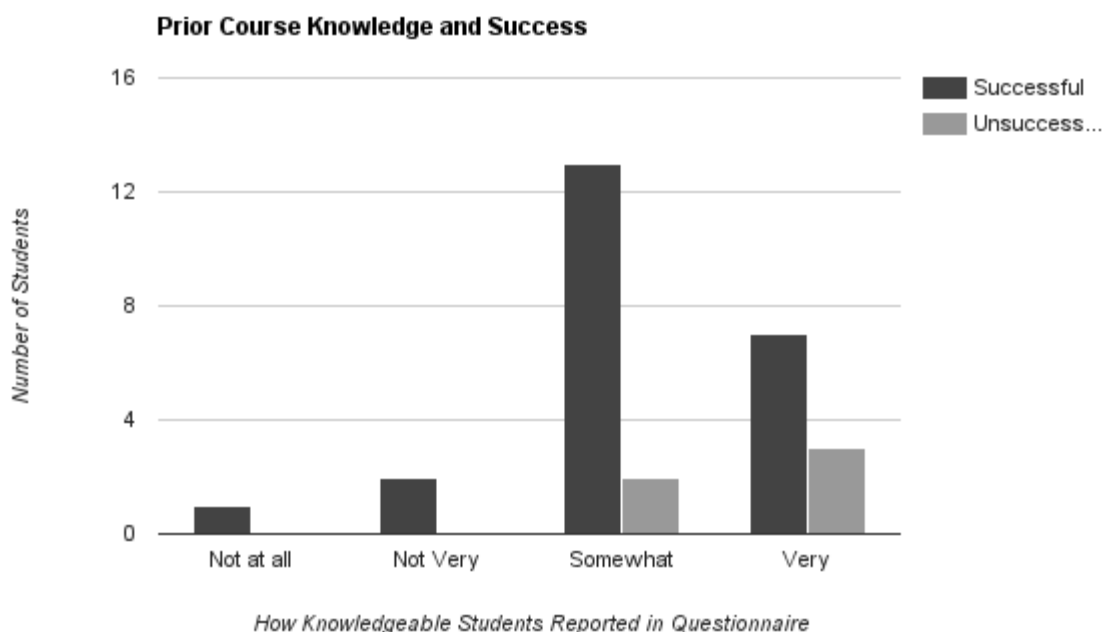
Most of the students in the interview felt they were prepared for the challenges. In order to compare whether or not students felt prepared at the end of the course to their perceived knowledge of online courses in the beginning of the course, a Goodman and Kruskal’s Lambda Test<sup>36</sup> was run. This test was used to determine whether or not knowledge of online courses reported in the questionnaire could predict whether or not students felt prepared for online learning at the end. The result for the model itself was 0. This result means that previous knowledge of online courses was not able to predict perceived preparation for the challenges of online learning. A Fisher’s Exact Test was then run to see if there was any relationship between Knowledge and Preparation and this result was also not statistically significant ( $p=.632$ ). This result suggests that how knowledgeable students feel at the beginning of a course is not associated with how prepared they feel they were at the end of the course.

<sup>36</sup> This test was used because the data was not normally distributed, the variables were multinomial and it is less susceptible to small sample sizes.



### 6.4.2 Expectations and Success

When considering whether or not this knowledge led to success, knowledge and final grades must be compared. In order to do this, the data was organized by the number of successful students who fell into each knowledge category from the questionnaire response analysis (see *Figure 6.5*). The results suggest that unsuccessful students began the course thinking that they were fairly knowledgeable about online courses.



*Figure 6.5.* Prior Course Knowledge and Success. This graph illustrates the number of students who were successful or unsuccessful and their coordinating knowledge about online courses as reported in the questionnaire.

When comparing student reported preparation from the interview with success, there is a more distinct connection (see Table 6.12). All of the successful students felt they were prepared for the challenges of online learning, while only one unsuccessful student did and the other two did not.

Table 6.12

*Preparation for Online Challenges and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Felt Prepared	14	1
Did not Feel Prepared	0	2

This suggests that while perceived prior knowledge did not impact success, that success may impact how prepared a student felt they were.

### 6.4.3 Outliers

The two unsuccessful students (NAS1614 and NAS1627) who indicated that they felt somewhat knowledgeable at the beginning of the course were the same two who indicated that they did not feel prepared for the challenges of online learning at the end of the course. This suggests that though some students may think they are knowledgeable about online learning, they are not knowledgeable in helpful ways.

The outliers from the data about how knowledgeable students felt were those that felt not at all or not very knowledgeable. These 3 students were successful in the course, passing with an *A*, *B* and *C*. It is possible that, Possibly, had they been provided with more information about online courses, the *B* and *C* students might have been *A* students. The only other outlier that should be mentioned is the unsuccessful student (NAS1618) who felt very knowledgeable at the beginning and felt prepared at the end. This student has continually been an outlier among outliers and will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

### 6.4.4 Knowledge and Preparation Discussion

The results of this section indicate either that knowledge of online courses does not prepare students for the online course challenges or that there was confusion over what

constituted knowledge in the questionnaire wording. This is suggested because there was a student (NAS1614) who indicated that they did not think they needed to be prepared, but who also indicated feeling Somewhat Knowledgeable about online courses at the start of the semester. This finding is important because it suggests that maybe the information students are receiving about online courses does not cover all areas of online learning, specifically those that lead to success.

### **6.5 Online Course Expectations and Success Discussion**

Students in this study took the course online for largely the same reasons that students in previous studies have indicated: time constraints. The students in this study also took the course online for academic reasons and for geographic reasons. Overall, most students were expecting the online version of the course to be different and started the semester with a negative view of those differences. Those who did not think it would be different tended to have a different experience with face-to-face courses. This experience tended toward non-interactive face-to-face instructors and indicated that students expected the same type of interaction in online courses. Despite previous scholarship suggestions, those students who felt that online and face-to-face would be similar were all successful in the course.

Attitudes toward online courses changed for most students, and despite the fact that most of the students interviewed had negative attitudes toward online courses, those who changed attitudes largely changed for the better. Additionally, while some students changed to negative attitudes and were still successful, none of the unsuccessful students had positive attitudes toward online courses at the end of the semester. Whether negative attitudes are due to being unsuccessful or due to the experience itself cannot be determined from the current data. The results from the differences and attitudes section align with and partially explain some of the

results from previous chapters. In short, instructor interaction matters, but so does peer interaction.

When considering the results from the section on knowledge and preparation, most students felt at least somewhat knowledgeable and most students felt prepared. However, of notable importance are those who did not feel prepared and how their preparation related to their previous knowledge about online courses. As discussed above, the results suggest that students may not be receiving enough preparatory resources before taking the online courses, but some may not be aware of this.

## CHAPTER 7

### INSTITUTIONAL PERCEPTIONS AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

#### **7.1 Summary of Results**

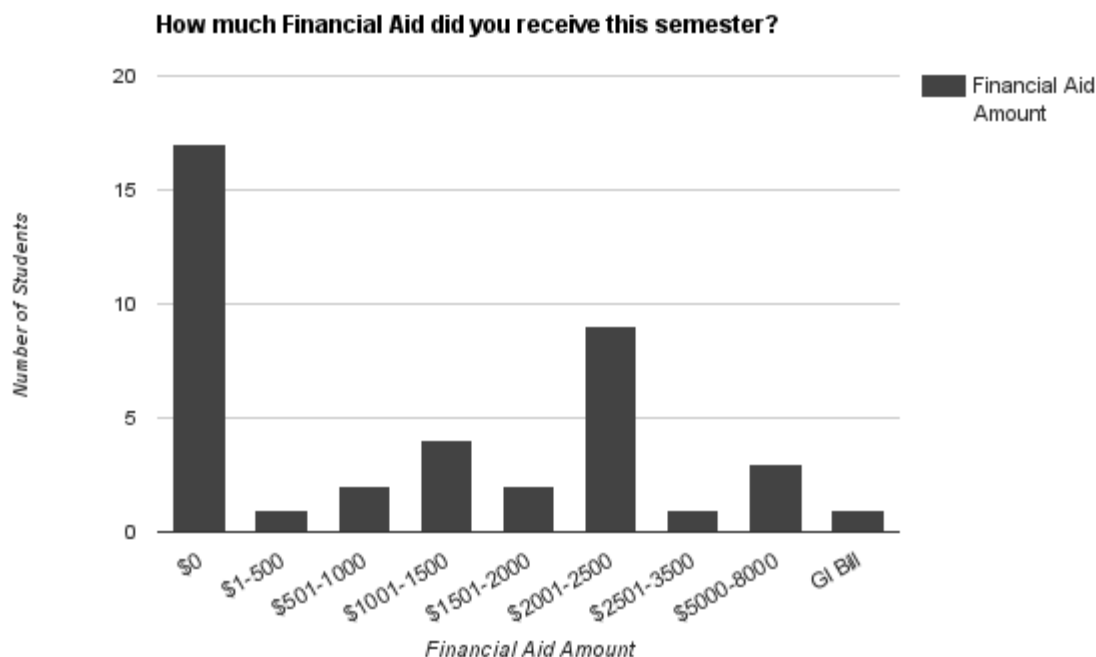
The data concerning the institutional expectations of students was gathered in the questionnaire and includes the data about financial aid information, expected family/friends support, HS GPA, Current GPA, highest Parental Education level, and HS Graduation or GED year. The student perspectives come directly from the interview and so do not set up already established expectations. In order to determine if the students met expectations, the established institutional expectation of risk was compared to student success. The other area of student expectations discussed in this chapter comes from the interview question that asks students directly if their expectations were met. The remainder of the chapter then analyzes the student responses to the interview questions that focus on the impact of multiple factors on performance and success.

#### **7.2 Institutional Perceptions of Students**

##### **7.2.1 Expectations of Students**

The final questions in the questionnaire did not ask students of their own expectations for the course, but rather were aimed at gathering data that has been indicated in the literature as information that lets an institution know what to expect from the student. Question 19 asked how much financial aid the student was receiving because, as mentioned in Chapter 2, financial aid has been used to predict success in online courses as those who have received financial aid are more likely to be “successful” (Fike & Fike, 2008). Of the 39 students who responded, 45% (18 students) answered \$0, 26% (10 students) answered \$2001-2500, 10% (four students) responded

“Other” and noted receiving financial aid between \$3500-8000, 10% (four students) responded \$1001-1500, 5% (two students responded \$501-1000, and 3% (one student) each responded \$1-500 and \$1501-2000 (see *Figure 7.1*). By the logic in the literature, 46% of the students who took the survey would be considered at risk because they did not receive any financial aid.



*Figure 7.1.* How much Financial Aid did you receive this semester? This graph illustrates how much financial aid respondents received in the Spring 2016 semester.

The next item in the questionnaire asked students whether they were aware of certain student support services. As noted in Chapter 2, the literature shows that support services increased retention of online students (Grillo & Leist, 2013). They only work, however, if students know they exist. Of the 40 respondents, only 38 responded to this particular question. The option “None” was provided, so it is assumed that those two student simply skipped the question as opposed to not having heard of any of the services listed. The most well-known student support services, services that a large majority of students were aware of, were the Testing Centers (89%

or 34 students), the IT Help Desk (82% or 31 students), Library Services (79% or 30 students), Advising and Counseling (76% or 29 students), and Career Counseling (66% or 25 Students). Approximately half of the respondents were aware of the Online Tutoring Services (55% or 21 students), Transfer Planning (55% or 21 students), Free Software Downloads (53% or 20 students), the Student Handbook (53% or 20 students), and Campus tutoring services (47% or 18 students).

The least known student support services, the ones that less than 50% of students knew about, were the locations of Student Support Service Centers (42% or 16 students), Open Computer Labs (39% or 15 students), Disability Services (37% or 14 students), College Pathway Initiatives (29% or 11 students), GPS for success (24% or nine students), GPA Calculator (24% or nine students), Veterans Affairs (18% or seven students), International Student Resources (18% or seven students), Cooperative Education and Internships (8% or three students), and Cloud Printing and Storage (8% or three students) (see *Figure 7.2*). This result might suggest that the most commonly needed services are the ones that are the best known. Things like advising, testing centers, the library and the IT Desk are all services necessary to taking many courses offered through ELI.

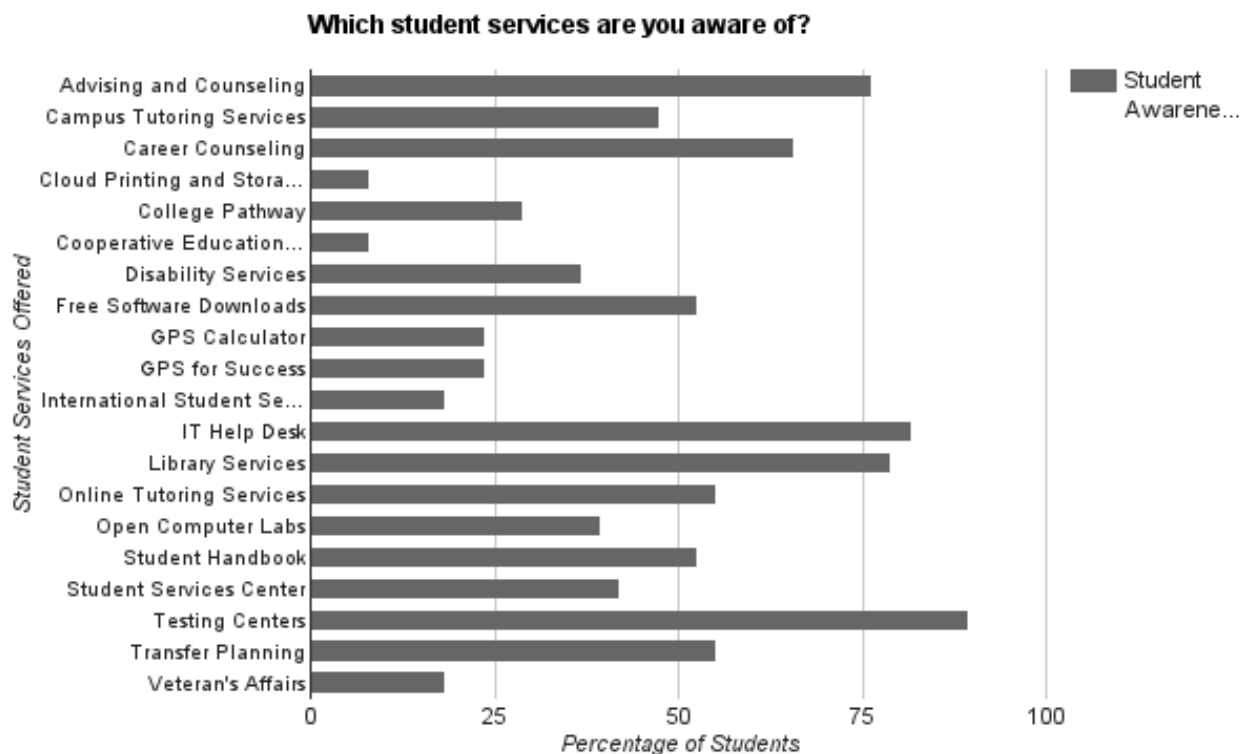


Figure 7.2. Which student services are you aware of? This graph illustrates the percentage of students aware of the student services available to online students at NOVA.

The responses to prompt 21 on the questionnaire suggest that there is a bit of truth to that assumption; however, it is not completely correct. Question 21 asked how students learned about these services. These responses were grouped into the following categories: College Organized Programs, Previous Use/Past Courses, College Advertising, and Word of Mouth. Overall, the most statements (26) indicated that students learned about the services from college advertising. This category was built from the codes *school email*, *campus signage*, *campus visits*, and *web research*. There were 16 statements that indicated Previous Use and Courses (see Table 7.1). This category was built from the codes *need*, *used*, *past instructor*, and *past course*. These codes were lumped together because the need to use these services often arises while taking or registering for a course. The College Organized Programs category has 12 statements and was



built from the codes *SDV*, *orientation*, *counseling*, and *military base liaison*. The final category, Word of Mouth, had only five statements and was built from the codes *friends*, *other students*, *coworkers*, *peers*, and *acquaintances*.

Table 7.1

*Sources of Information on Student Services*

Source	Codes	Student Response Examples
College Advertising	<i>school email, campus signage, campus visits, web research</i>	“Through walking around the campus and checking out the webpage” (NAS1602) “on the website and on campus grounds” (NAS1601) “School emails and posted signs on campus” (NAS1619) “I just skimmed through the website when I needed to” (NAS1631)
Previous Use and Courses	<i>past instructor, need, use, past course</i>	“Some I’ve needed to use for past courses” (NAS1632) “have used those services” (NAS1636) “most instructors include in their syllabus where to find services and help” (NAS1626)
College Organized Programs	<i>orientation, SDV, counseling office, military base liaison</i>	“NOVA orientation” (NAS1628) “SDV 100” (NAS1630) “Orientation” (NAS1634) “talking to my counselor” (NAS1621) “my NOVA rep on base” (NAS1609)
Word of Mouth	<i>friends, family, coworkers, peers, acquaintances</i>	“heard from other students” (NAS1603) “talking to people” (NAS1634) “Peers and coworkers” (NAS16NC1)

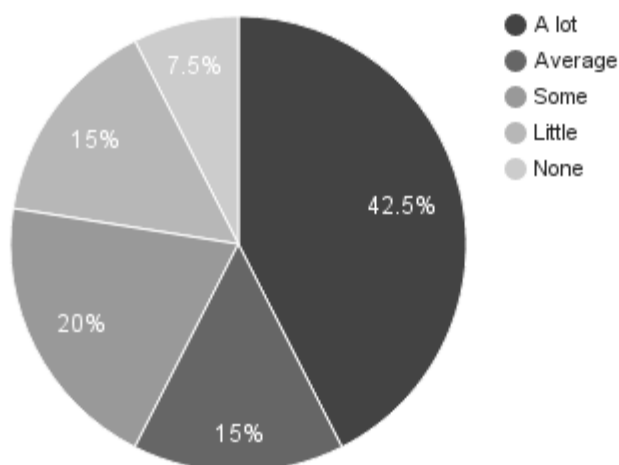
While this question set does not address expectations specifically, it can help the institution to recognize where more work might be done to make students aware of these services. If they are not aware of them, they cannot use them. It also, when taken into

consideration with the responses from Question 20, shows how students are learning about the institution and what support the college might have to offer.

As noted in Chapter 2, the retention literature also indicates that support is a key factor in student success (Boston, et al., 2009; Grillo & Leist, 2013; Herbert, 2006; Nichols, 2010).

Question 22 asked how much support students felt they received from friends and family. The majority of students felt they receive support with the largest percentage (42.5% or 17 students) indicating receiving a lot of support, 20% (eight students) indicating they receive some support, 15% (six students) indicating they receive an average amount of support, and the same percentage indicating they receive little support. Finally, 7.5% (three students) indicated that they receive no support from family and friends (see *Figure 7.3*).

**How much support do you receive from family and friends?**



*Figure 7.3.* How much support do you receive from family and friends? This graph illustrates the percentage of students who receive certain amounts of support from family and friends.

These results indicate that the majority of students are at least receiving average support at home, but that leaves the other 42.5% who are receiving less than average support from family and friends and so would be considered at risk.

Another common factor used to predict success is GPA. Both High School GPA and current college GPA are long standing predictors of college retention in general (Astin, 1993; Crews & Aragon, 2004; Metzner & Bean, 1987). A low GPA often labels a student “at risk.” In both cases, a low GPA would be considered anything under a *C* average, which is a 2.10. This distinction is partially because, when considering all the GPA studies, those with a GPA between 2.0 and 3.0 are most at risk (Boston, et al., 2012; Wladis & Conway, 2014). Additionally, a *C* is what is often required to consider this prerequisite course satisfied as well. When asked about high school GPA, 22.5% (nine students) selected a GPA of 3.5 or higher, 25% (10 students) selected a GPA of 3.0-3.49, 30% (12 students) selected a GPA of 2.5-2.99, 10% (four students) selected a GPA of 2.0-2.49, 2.5% (one student) selected a GPA of 1.5-1.99 and 10% (four students) indicated that they did not remember (see *Figure 7.4*).

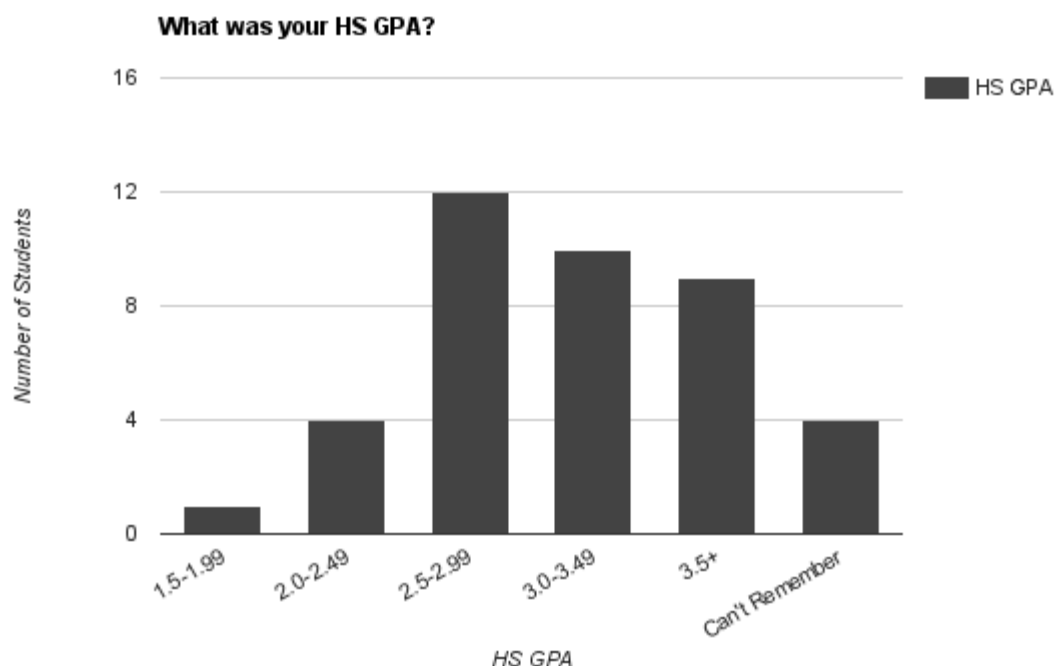
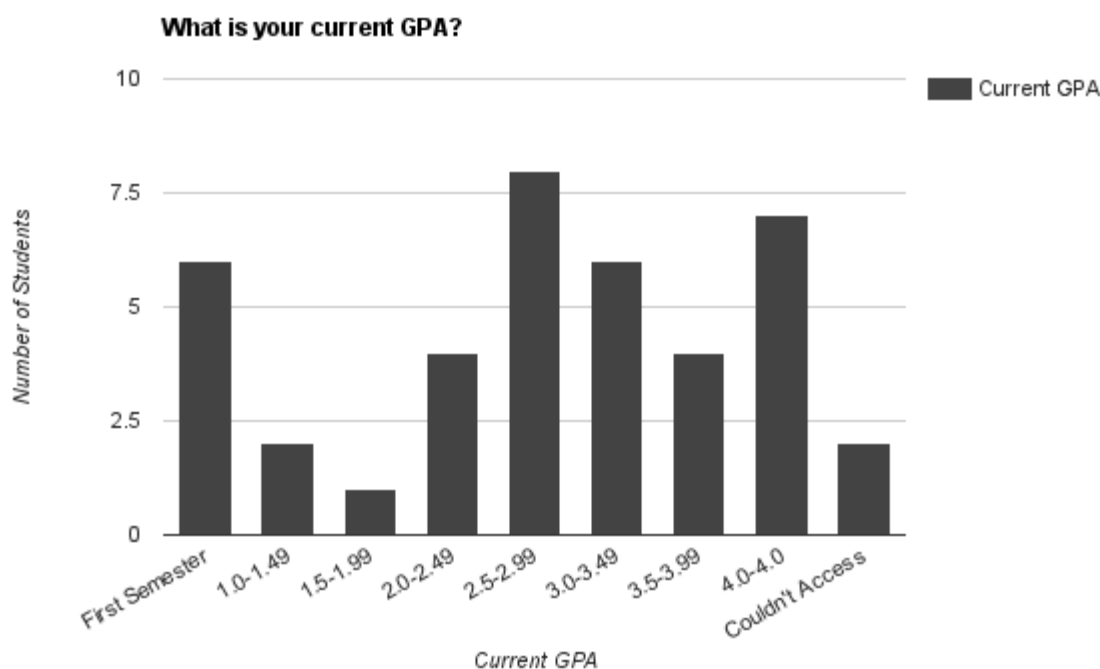


Figure 7.4. What was your HS GPA? This graph illustrates student reported high school GPA.

The research suggests that students who have a low high school GPA are likely to not be retained, which means at least one student is defined as “at risk” based on high school GPA (Bean & Metzner, 1987; Friedman & Mandel, 2011). The data here indicates that most students who completed the questionnaire would be expected to be successful.

When asked their current college GPA, students typed in their responses and I placed the responses into the same categories used for HS GPA. This analysis resulted in seven students (17.5%) with a GPA of 4.0, four students (10%) with a GPA in the 3.5-3.99 range, six students (15%) with a GPA in the 3.0-3.49 range, 8 students (20%) between the range of 2.5 and 2.99, 4 students (10%) between 2.0 and 2.49, one student (2.5%) between 1.5 and 1.99, two students (5%) between 1.0 and 1.49, six students (15%) in their first semester, and two students (5%) who were unable to access their current GPA (see Figure 7.5). Some of the literature suggests that

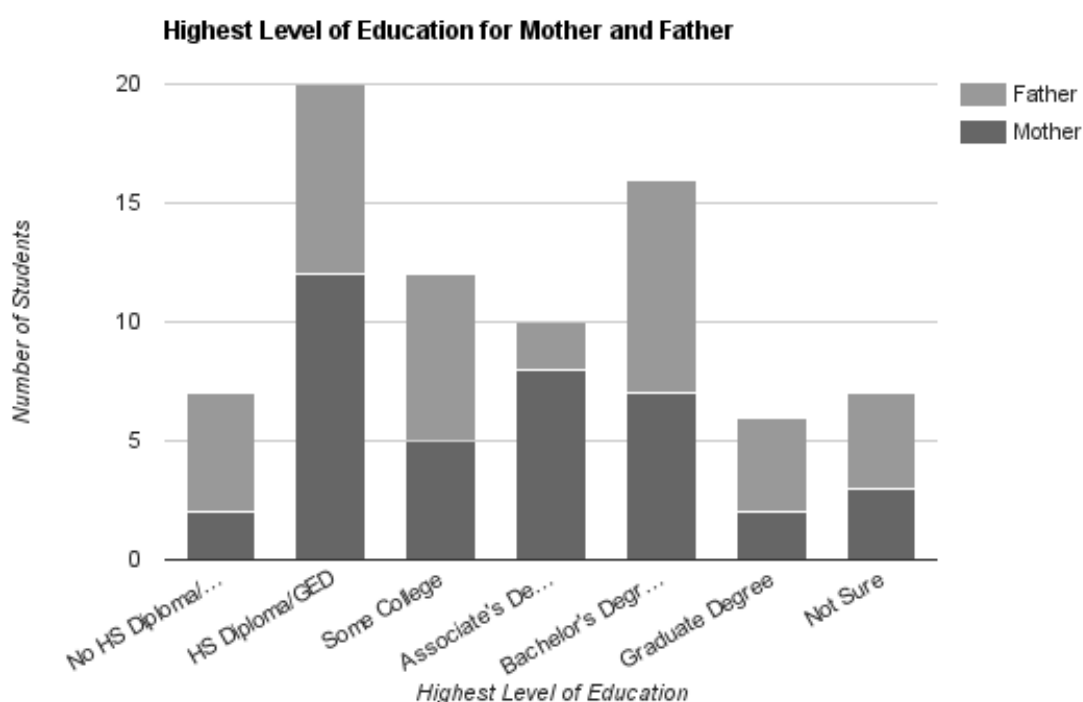
those with a GPA in the range of 2.0-3.5 are most at risk in online courses (Hachey, et al., 2014). That means that 45% of the students who completed the questionnaire (18 students) had the highest risk for dropout. At NOVA, a student is in good academic standing with a GPA of 2.0 or higher. By this standard, 7.5% of the students are at risk, with another possible 15% of the first semester students. As noted in Chapter 2, research suggests that the first year is critical (Feldman, 1993; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Parmar & Trotter, 2004), so that 15% of students in their first semester are considered at risk as well, for a total of 22.5% of students at risk based on current GPA. This does not include those who could not access their GPA when the questionnaire was administered.



*Figure 7.5.* What is your current GPA? This chart illustrates the current GPA as indicated by the students taking the questionnaire.

The next question asked about parental education level. This question, as noted in Chapter 2, was asked because studies (Astin, 1993; Crissman, 2001) have found a connection

between parental education and retention. The more education parents have received the more likely students are to be successful. As seen in *Figure 7.6*, the majority of the students' mothers and fathers at least graduated high school, while more fathers than mothers completed some form of higher education. Based on the data, 38.5% of fathers and 48.6% of mothers completed a two-year degree or higher. This result means that the majority of students have parents that did not complete a college degree, which puts them in the "at risk" category.



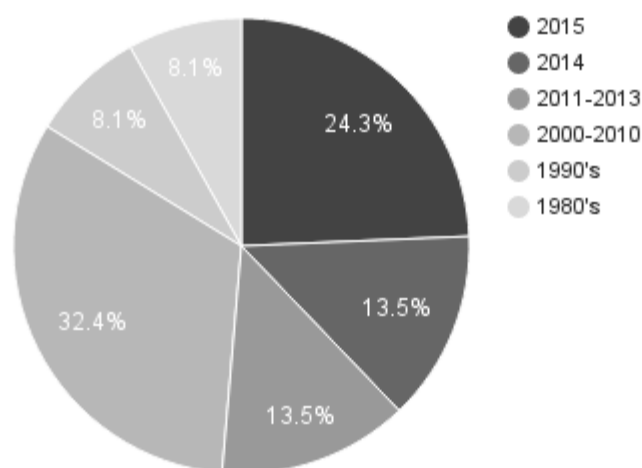
*Figure 7.6.* Highest Level of Education for Mother and Father. This graph illustrates the number of students who reported the highest level of education for each parent.

The final questionnaire item asked what year the student graduated high school in order to determine whether length of time between high school and this course has an impact on success. The literature suggests that delaying enrollment in postsecondary education beyond the year after graduating high school has been shown to impact retention (Horn et al., 1995). This

question was open-ended, so I divided the responses up by decade except for the last 5 years.

The last two years (2014 and 2015) were reported individually and the previous three years were reported together (see *Figure 7.7*). The responses were divided this way because delayed enrollment has been suggested to impact retention (Horn et al., 1995).

**What year did you graduate high school or receive your GED?**



*Figure 7.7.* What year did you graduate high school or receive your GED? This graph illustrates the percentage of students who graduated from high school in a given year or range.

Considering these questions together, it appears that some of the predictor variables contradict each other with most students not receiving financial aid (and so are at risk), most students receiving support from family and friends (which does not put them at risk), most students having a High School GPA of a *C* or greater (so not at risk), the majority of students having a current GPA that does not put them at risk, and most students having parents that do not have a college degree (and so are at risk). Coupled with the large number of students who identified other responsibilities as the reasons for taking the online class, the respondents

collectively seem to fit the profile of the community college student, but send “mixed messages” as far as predicting success.

### **7.2.2 Meeting Those Expectations with Success**

The previous section ended with a discussion of the conflicts presented by the data students provided that is often used by institutions to label a student as “at risk.” The first of these markers that this study asked students to identify is financial aid. The literature suggests that students who do not receive financial aid are at a greater risk for dropout (Fike & Fike, 2008). In order to test this idea, the financial aid data was coded for risk with zero being *At Risk* and one being *Not at Risk*. Tracked and reported student final grades were coded for success with one being *Successful* and zero being *Not Successful*. The second predictive factor that the questionnaire asked about was GPA. The questionnaire asked for both High School and current GPA. Current GPA was used as a predictor of risk unless the student was a first time student. In that case, HS GPA was used. Again, dummy variables were created with zero being *At Risk* and one being *Not at Risk*. Responses were coded *At Risk* if student GPA fell below 3.0 as some of the literature indicates that at students below 2.0 are at risk (Nora, Barlow & Crips, 2005) and some indicate that those between 2.0 and 3.0 are most at risk (Diaz, 2002). Those above a 3.0 GPA were coded *Not at Risk* because I felt that 3.0 would be more inclusive of the literature.

The third predictive factor was family support. This question asked (on a Likert scale) how much support students expected to receive. The literature suggests that students who have support at home are more likely to succeed (Boston, et al., 2009; Nichols, 2010; Grillo & Leist, 2013; Herbert, 2006; Morris & Finnegan, 2009). First, these categories were compared to the reported family support in the interview. Only four students had a shift in support and only two went from receiving support to not receiving support. Therefore, when a Fisher’s Exact Test was



run, it was not statistically significant ( $p=.069$ ). The results of the expectations then were used to predict success. These categories were also converted to dummy variables. Students who received some support through a lot of support were coded as zero and so *Not at Risk* while those who replied “Little” or “None” were coded as one and so *At Risk*.

The fourth predictive factor was parental education levels. Because it was established that the more education parents had the more likely students were to be successful (Fike & Fike, 2008), this variable was dummy coded with zero as *Not graduating High school or receiving a GED*, one as *Graduated HS or Received a GED*, two as *Some College*, three as an *Associate's Degree*, four as a *Bachelor's Degree*, and five as a *Graduate Degree*.

The final predictive factor in the questionnaire was the year the student graduated high school. It was noted in the literature that delaying college beyond one year after graduating high school had a negative impact on retention (Horn et al., 1995). However, the source was not more specific, so anyone that graduated before 2014 was labeled as *At Risk*. This label was then converted to the dummy variables one for *Not at Risk* and zero for *At Risk*. A binomial logistic regression was performed to determine the effects of all the predictive factors on final grades. This analysis resulted in a model that was not statistically significant ( $X^2(5)=17.309$ ,  $p=.068$ ). This result means that the data does not fit the predictive model, and so the variables are not predictive of the outcomes. This finding means that whether or not students are considered at risk due to their financial situation, their most recent GPA, their support at home, their parents' highest level of education, or their time since high school are not accurate predictors of whether or not they are successful in the course. Because regressions can be susceptible to small sample size issues, a Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test<sup>37</sup> was also run for each factor. Each test

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<sup>37</sup> This test was run because it is used for non-normally distributed data from small samples sizes that used multinomial variables.

resulted in zero. This result confirms that none of the risk factors could predict student success in this study.

**7.2.2.1 Outliers.** Because the dataset was small enough, I could visually look at the five unsuccessful students to determine whether or not they had established “risk factors” at the beginning of the course. None of the five unsuccessful students would have been considered “at risk” based on Financial Aid information. The literature establishes that those without financial aid are the highest at risk (Fike & Fike, 2008), and these students all indicated that they were at least in the 1001-1500 range. Of the five unsuccessful students, three were considered “at risk” for their most recent GPA. All three students’ GPAs fell between 2.0 and 3.0. None of the five students were “at risk” in terms of support from family and friends. Out of the five, three students had a parent with a Bachelor’s Degree as the highest education, one student had a parent with Some College, and one student did not have any parents who graduated high school. This finding would suggest that one unsuccessful student was at risk. Out of the five unsuccessful students, three students graduated high school more than 2 years ago. All five students had one risk factor, and only one student had two risk factors (see Table 7.2).

Table 7.2

*Outliers: Unsuccessful Student Risk Factors*

Student Code	Financial Aid	HS/College GPA	Support	Highest Parental Education	HS Graduation
NAS1614	1001-1500	2.5-2.99/2.07	A lot	Associate’s	2015
NAS1617	2001-2500	3.5+/CA <sup>38</sup>	Some	HS Grad/GED	2000-2010
NAS1618	5000	3.0-3.45/3.39	Average	Bachelor’s	1990’s
NAS1627	2001-2500	2.0-2.49/2.5	A lot	Bachelor’s	2014

<sup>38</sup> Student reported that s/he could not access at the time the questionnaire was completed.

Table 7.2 Continued

Student Code	Financial Aid	HS/College GPA	Support	Highest Parental Education	HS Graduation
NAS1636	2001-2500	2.5-2.99/2.88	Some	Bachelor's	1980's

However, out of all 28 students who completed the questionnaire and either had their final grade tracked or reported it in the interview, only one student did not have a single risk factor. All this suggests that, while the students who are not successful do have risk factors, these factors are not predictive of final grades in an online composition course. These results may suggest that Paigen Reichert Powell had a point when she says that we should assume all students may drop (2013). This suggestion does not mean we should try to prevent it, but instead, that preventative measures should be taken for all students.

### 7.3 Student Perspectives

#### 7.3.1 Were Student Expectations Met?

The second question in the interview asked students if their expectations of the course were met. These open responses were first coded for *Yes* and *No*. This analysis resulted in 12 students who felt their expectations were met. Of those 12, three were hedging<sup>39</sup> *Yes*, and two implied that the course exceeded expectations. There were four students who did not have their expectations met and one who could not respond because they came to the class without any expectations. The responses were then coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding (see Table 7.3). It was found that four students (who happened to be the four that said *No*) indicated that their difficulty expectations were not met and that the course was easier than expected in a variety of ways, and one student indicated that their expectations were met, but they were unable

<sup>39</sup> Used phrases like “pretty much” or “I guess.”

to keep up. There were two students who indicated that their expectations for the difficulty of the course were met. There were two students who indicated that their course requirement expectations were not met, and that these were positive outcomes, and two students who indicated that their expectations for interaction were not met and this was a positive outcome. There were four students who indicated that the course requirements met their expectations. There were two students who unexpectedly<sup>40</sup> learned something new. Finally, the following outcomes are not reported in the table: there were two students who did not say anything more than *Yes*, and one student who only said that expectations were not established.

Table 7.3

*Student Perspective of Meeting Expectations*

Category	Codes	Student Example Responses
Difficulty Expectations Not Met	<i>expected more time, expected self-motivation to be difficult, expected the course to be more difficult, expected it to be difficult to engage, expected deadlines to be difficult, time management difficulty</i>	“I thought that I would be pulling all-nighters” (NAS1601) “difficulty in self-motivation” (NAS1604) “I thought it would be more difficult” (NAS1605) “I expected it to be difficult to parse assignments” (NAS1630) “Kind of, I just wish I could keep up more” (NAS1614)
Difficulty Expectations Met	<i>expected it to be easy, same difficulty</i>	“I didn’t expect the course to be terribly difficult” (NAS1619) “difficulty level was on par with my expectations” (NAS1635)
Course Requirement Expectations Not Met	<i>cut and dry essays and assignments, not engaging, reading</i>	“I expected to write essays. . .which came true, but in a more dynamic way” (NAS1604) “I wasn’t expecting it to be so engaging”(NAS1607)

<sup>40</sup> Students indicated that the result was unexpected.

Table 7.3 Continued

Category	Codes	Student Example Responses
Course Requirement Expectations Met	<i>course load, weekly assignments, due dates, group assignments, ELI format, essays, past experience, flexible</i>	“Online course are pretty straightforward. Weekly assignments and due dates and clearly outlined” (NAS1618) “This was not my first time in an ELI course, so every aspect of the class was expected” (NAS1631) “The course load. . .was on par with my expectations” (NAS1635) “I have done online courses before and it was similar” (NAS1624) “allow me flexibility in my time management, and this was the case” (NAS1630)
Interaction Expectations Not Met	<i>slow feedback, lacking communication</i>	“the ongoing communication and quick professor feedback made a big difference” (NAS1607) “I was worried I would have no idea if my work was bad or good until I was graded. This was not the case” (NAS1630)
Learning Expectations Exceeded	<i>unexpected learning</i>	“I learned so much from following the outline process” (NAS1613) “about halfway through the course when I was having to learn more information to properly do an assignment I was actually a little bit excited” (NAS1623)

As noted above, all four students who indicated that their expectations were not met indicated this being a positive thing. Overall, this data suggests that most students were having their expectations met or exceeded in some way. Only one student indicated that their expectations were met but provided a negative outcome.

### 7.3.2 Did This Perspective Impact Final Grades?

In order to determine whether or not perceived met expectations led to success, I compared student responses from the interview question with final grades. In this case, 70% of students were successful and had their expectations met, 12% were successful and did not have

their expectations met, 12% were unsuccessful and did not have their expectations met and 6% were unsuccessful and did have their expectations met (see Table 7.4).

Table 7.4

*Met Expectation and Coordinating Success*

	Successful	Unsuccessful
Yes	12	1
No	2	2

A Goodman and Kruskal's Lambda Test resulted in a value of 0, which indicates that there is no statistical relationship between student expectations being met and their final grade. Again, this result might be caused by the small sample size because such a significant percentage (70%) of students had their expectations met and were successful.

### 7.3.3 Student Perspectives of Success

In order to obtain the student perspective about success and performance, a series of open-ended questions were asked in the interviews. These questions tried to elicit responses concerning factors that may have impacted student performance.

The first of these was whether or not there were any significant life events that occurred during the semester and whether or not the students thought this life event might have impacted their performance. As noted in Chapter 3, the responses were initially coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding, then categorized. The responses were then coded for impact using the same process. There were five students (29%) who indicated that there were no life events during the semester. Out of the 12 who had something occur, five students (29%) indicated that the death of someone close to them occurred during the semester. Out of those 5, 4 indicated that

it affected performance and 1 indicating it did not. There were four students (24%) that had some sort of illness and all four felt it affected their performance; two students (12%) moved and one felt it affected their performance and the other did not. Two students (12%) had unexpected job stress and both felt it affected performance, and one student (6%) lost outside support but did not feel it affected performance. So a total of nine students (53%) felt that a significant life event impacted their performance, while three students (18%) felt that a life event did not impact their performance, and five students (29%) did not have a significant life event occur during the semester (see Table 7.5).

Table 7.5

*Life Events and their Impact on Performance*

Life Event Category With Impact	Codes	Student Response Examples
No Life Event During Spring 2016 Semester	<i>N/A</i>	“None” (NAS1605) “Nothing” (NAS1628) “Nothing happened” (NAS1614) “There wasn’t any life events that had occurred” (NAS1615)
Death (No Impact)	<i>death in the family, death anniversary</i>	“Death in the family. I don’t think it effected my performance” (NAS16190)
Death (Impact)	<i>death in the family, death anniversary (momentarily affected; affected; somewhat affected)</i>	“I have experienced the death of a grandparent. . .Momentarily, I felt the death halted my performance, but with the support of family I regained momentum” (NAS1604) “it was my cousin's death anniversary and it effected my performance in the class” (NAS1606) “experienced a death in our family. This somewhat effectively positively my performance. . .as I was taking ENG at the time and was extremely emotional while writing essays” (NAS1607) “Death in the family. Yes, this effected my performance as I was. . .unable to focus on school.” (NAS1618)

Table 7.5 Continued

Life Event Category With Impact	Codes	Student Response Examples
Illness (Impact)	<i>undisclosed illness, bad cold, carpal tunnel (greatly effected; affected, somewhat affected; moderately affected)</i>	<p>“I have experienced an illness in the last two months. . .having several appointments within the past several weeks, I felt that this has greatly affected me and my school work” (NAS1623)</p> <p>“I was not feeling well from a bad cold. . .I think that effected my performance in the course” (NAS1627)</p> <p>“Carpal Tunnel. Somewhat, I adjusted some ergonomics as well as planned farther out to have plenty of time” (NAS1630)</p> <p>“I experienced an illness and it had a moderate effect on the course” (NAS1624)</p>
Move (No Impact)	<i>long distance move</i>	<p>“I moved to a different city. . .I was able to use time management and complete all of my courses with an A” (NAS1613)</p>
Move (Impact)	<i>news of a move (somewhat effect)</i>	<p>“the news of a cross-country move. . .has slowly unraveled the impact it might have on me, but I have viewed this change as a reason to improve” (NAS1604)</p>
Job Stress (Impact)	<i>general job stress, unexpected job stress</i>	<p>“Unplanned shifts at work made it increasingly difficult to meet weekday assignment due dates” (NAS1635)</p> <p>“stressed out from my job. . .I think that effected my performance” (NAS1627)</p>
Loss of support (No Impact)	<i>family moved away</i>	<p>“a close cousin of mine transferred to another school. . . We usually conversed about classes. . .after he transferred, he hasn’t had much time to talk to me. . .it really didn’t affect my performance because I had prior experience with ELI classes” (NAS1631)</p>



Interestingly, when comparing whether or not students felt these events had an impact on their success, six of the nine students who indicated that the life event impacted their performance earned a grade of *A* in the course. Of the remaining three, one earned a grade of *B* and two earned grades of *F*. This result is interesting because it implies that though students earned an *A*, they felt that they could have done better. It also suggests that maybe students are not equating performance with traditional definitions of success. It is possible that performance is something that is more subjective.

In addition to asking students about life events and performance, the interview asked about factors that contributed to student performance in the course. This was divided into two questions: general contributing factors and internal course factors. The question asking for contributing factors in general was coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding. These codes were then categorized. The categories that developed were Course Factors, the Interactions during the course, and Personal Factors. There were seven students (41%) who indicated Course Factors as contributing factors to performance, four students (24%) who indicated Interactions as contributing factors, and eight students (47%) who indicated that Personal Factors contributed to their performance in the course. Some students indicated more than one category, so the above percentages do not equal 100 (see Table 7.6).

Table 7.6

*General Factors Contributing to Performance*

Category	Codes	Student Response Examples
Course	<i>course design, course content, deadlines</i>	“The course was designed to be easy to follow” (NAS1613) “I understood the material” (NAS1615) “The expectations and criteria were very clear and detailed” (NAS1630) “I could have improved if I turned in my paper on time” (NAS1635)

Table 7.6 Continued

Category	Codes	Student Response Examples
Course	<i>course design, course content, deadlines</i>	“The deadlines made me definitely do the assignments.” (NAS1628) “the assignments were busy work and not beneficial to the learning process. I would prefer more analytical thinking than just responding to the assigned questions” (NAS1619)
Interactions	<i>feedback, relationships, social expectations</i>	“I believe the relationships between the teacher and student. . .that led me to have more confidence” (NAS1601) “With less distractions. . .and few expectations in my social life, I was able to perform at my highest abilities throughout the course” (NAS1604) “The feedback I had received really contributed during the course. There was more feedback than I have ever experienced” (NAS1623)
Personal	<i>effort, support, personal life, personal preferences</i>	“I could have done better” (NAS1605) “I tried my best while having a learning disability” (NAS1606) “I live a busy life. . .the support from surrounding family was helpful to do better” (NAS1607) “I had my parents’ support doing it” (NAS1615) “miss that ‘inspiring’ aspect. Face-to-face classes offer a much greater opportunity to be inspired, motivated to learn and find the passion in learning” (NAS1618) “I didn’t try my hardest” (NAS1627)

Out of the 17 respondents, only one student (NAS1627) specifically indicated that their performance was negative. This student was one of the unsuccessful students. Interestingly, the other student (NAS1605) who indicated that they did not put in their best effort was a student who completed the course with a *B*. The student that indicated that their performance was positive was another unsuccessful student (NAS1618) who responded that their performance was positive.

The second interview question that asked about factors impacting performance asked specifically about internal course factors. These responses were coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding, then they were categorized. The resulting categories were Course Requirements,

Course Content/Design, and Interactions. There were three students who indicated Course Requirements as factors impacting performance, nine students who indicated that course Interactions were factors that impacted performance, and five students who indicated course content/design as impacting factors (see Table 7.7).

Table 7.7

*Internal Course Factors Impacting Performance*

Category	Codes	Student Response Example
Course Requirements	<i>assignment requirements, deadlines</i>	“unrealistic due dates” (NAS1635) “the amount of pages required to write” (NAS1601) “some assignments were difficult” (NAS1606)
Course Design/Content	<i>design, content</i>	“the fact that I like writing” (NAS1614) “The course content was interesting” (NAS1628) “The course was quite easy so I didn’t feel very challenged” (NAS1619) “The course was easy to follow” (NAS1613)
Interactions	<i>instructor connection, encouraging instructor, peers help, peers hinder</i>	“My instructor made it possible to feel a personal connection to their motivation for teaching through the computer screen” (NAS1604) “I think the instructor was great, she was very encouraging” (NAS1605) “other students help me succeed in the course” (NAS1607) “It.. made it difficult when my group members would not give me required feedback” (NAS1619) “I didn’t expect to receive so much helpful feedback for this course” (NAS1623) “The instructor was great” (NAS1630)

Interestingly, four students (two unsuccessful ones) did not respond to this question. This might be because it seems closely related to the previous question and so it might have felt

redundant even though the first question elicited responses other than course factors. This finding is interesting because it suggests that students might consider course factors to be a significant factor in course performance. Clearly, instructor activity and presence are significant factors. This result supports what previous studies have found (Arbaugh, 2010; Coppola, 2005; Komarraju, et al., 2010; Moore, et al., 2003) and what the results in Chapters 4-6 of this study suggested. It is also clear that while some experiences with classmates are positive, others are not. Responsibility for performance was also suggested by the data analysis of the definition of difficulty in Chapter 5. For those students who indicated responsibility for how difficult a course is, responsibility was given to the student or the instructor.

The final specific question that asked students their own perspective on course performance asked what frustrations students encountered. These responses were coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding, and then they were categorized. The results for these responses fell into four categories: None, Course Requirements, Peers, Personal. There were three students who indicated that they did not have frustrations, three who indicated course requirements, five who indicated peers, and six who indicated personal factors (see Table 7.8).

Table 7.8

*Frustrations Encountered*

Category	Codes	Student Response Example
None	<i>no frustrations</i>	“Nothing” (NAS1628) “None. Seriously” (NAS1630)
Course Requirements	<i>due dates, word count requirements, research paper timing</i>	“No meeting weekday assignment due dates” (NAS1635) “harder to meet the writing amount requirement” (NAS1601) “Research argument paper. . .toward the end of the semester” (NAS1606)

Table 7.8 Continued

Category	Codes	Student Response Example
Peers	<i>peer effort, peer feedback timing, disregard for peer review</i>	“group work participants waited till the last minute to submit their portion” (NAS1624) “tediousness of waiting for other students to turn in work” (NAS1631) “peers in my class who disregard the peer revision process as a viable piece for self-improvement” (NAS1604) “Classmates not putting in effort” (NAS1619)
Personal	<i>time management, no f2f interaction, personal, illness, internet connection</i>	“managing my time and trying to be active in the course” (NAS1627) “Not being able to keep up” (NAS1614) “Lack of face-to-face interaction” (NAS1618) “I had personal frustrations” (NAS1605) “unexpected illness that I’m currently struggling with” (NAS1623)

Some of the results from these responses are directly related to some of the factors that students felt impacted their performance. In fact, the majority of the categories are the same; however, in this case, there were enough comments about peer work that it became its own category. This result was interesting when considering the other peer related data in this study. It was found in Chapter 4 that student expectations of peer communication frequency were higher than both the amount the course required and the amount that students reported at the end of the semester. It is possible that this was because students were expecting more opportunities for social and academic forms of communication. However, considering student frustration with classmates’ lack of effort and quality of feedback might also give one reason why expectations were not met. This lack of classmate interaction might also explain why students indicated the inability to make friends or have a “colleague connection.” Because students may have been expecting to have some social interaction in the course, their perception of online courses may

have been negative. It appears to be the case that some students want to have interactions, whether social or academic, with their classmates, but both the lack of course opportunities and lack of peer effort may have been frustrating. This also suggests that course design is important and providing opportunities might be key to helping students find the connection they are looking for. Because 82% of the participants in this study were successful, this result suggests that it might be that a desire for connection is a factor of being successful.

### 7.3.4 Outliers

Overall, it seems that for two of the unsuccessful students (NAS1614 and NAS1627) that time management was a key issue in not being successful. The third unsuccessful student indicated that their expectations were met, but that not having face-to-face contact was a frustration and a contributing factor to performance in addition to a death in the family (see Table 7.9).

Table 7.9

*Outliers: Factors Impacting Performance*

Student Code	Expectations Met?	Life Events	General Factors	Course Factors	Frustrations
NAS1614	Dropped (No)	Nothing	N/A	Enjoy Writing	Keeping up
NAS1618	Yes	Death/Impacted	Personal Preferences: no interaction	N/A	No F2F
NAS1627	Poor Performance (No)	Illness, Job stress/ Impacted	Effort	N/A	Time Management

This suggests that maybe NAS1618, who is also the student who indicated in previous chapters that their expectations were met, understands and “deals with” the negative aspects of online courses, but had a death in the family that impacted performance.

#### 7.4 The Unsuccessful Perspective

The students who were unsuccessful in the course and completed the interview had two questions that were in addition to those asked of the successful students. The first question asked why the student stopped participating in the course, and the second asked if they felt they were successful up to the point where they stopped. The responses were coded using InVivo, descriptive, and sub-coding. They were then categorized. Because there were so few, the results are presented together in Table 7.10.

Table 7.10

##### *The Unsuccessful Perspective*

Student Code	Why did you stop participating?	Do you feel you were successful?	Additional coding
NAS 1618	Death: “A death in my family occurred and I was unable to regain my focus”	Yes	Why: Grades & Organization Skills
NAS 1627	Keeping up: “I personally had a hard time keeping up with my personal schedule”	No	Regret: wasting money & not withdrawing sooner
NAS 1614	Keeping up: “I just felt like I couldn’t keep up with everything that was expected of me with all my other classes.”	Yes	N/A

Of the three interviewees, two indicated that not keeping up was the reason for not continuing the class. The third (NAS1618) indicated a death in the family. This student and one of the “keeping up” students (NAS1614) both felt successful in the course up to the point where they stopped participating. Throughout the analysis in this study, there has been an outlier among unsuccessful students. Student NAS1618 indicated in previous chapters that their expectations were met by the course in peer communication frequency that they were very knowledgeable of online learning due to previous ELI courses and felt prepared for the challenges of online learning. This student also felt the course was as difficult as expected and that they learned what was expected. This student also reported spending more hours and logged in more hours than expect. So it appears that this student, as indicated in the response to the question that asked why they left, that a significant life event was enough to impact this student’s overall success. The remaining unsuccessful students both indicated that they were not able to keep up and it appears that this was the case.

### **7.5 Institutional Perceptions and Student Perspectives Discussion**

All but one of the students with reported or collected final grades ( $n=28$ ) had at least one risk factor for dropping out. When comparing student risk with success, there were no statistically significant results, which suggests that risk could not predict success in this study. Just like the other statistical tests, it is possible that small sample size impacted the results. However, when considering that 82% of the students were successful and had one or more risk factors, it may be the case that risk factors cannot accurately predict which students need preventative intervention. This being the case, it may be possible that all students need to receive the same treatment in prevention of dropout.



Interestingly, when analyzing the open-ended questions about expectations and performance in the interview, most students felt that their expectations were met. However, when comparing these responses with success, there was no statistical relationship between expectations being met and success. Regardless, the vast majority of successful students had expectations met and most of the unsuccessful students did not. The one unsuccessful student that did have expectations met was the one unsuccessful student who seemed to have all other expectations met and attributed performance to a death in the family (as opposed to not being able to keep up).

When analyzing the life events question, it was found that some students felt that their performance was impacted by a life event despite earning *As* and *Bs* in the course. This result suggests that students may view performance to be defined in a way other than grades. The questions that asked about factors that impacted performance in the course both primarily resulted in responses that indicated the course itself and interactions with instructors and peers. The other category that resulted was personal, and these were factors that dealt with personal preferences or issues outside of the academic realm. The results from the question that asked about frustrations in the course were the same: Course Factors, Personal Preference Factors, and Peers. There were a surprising number of students who indicated that they were frustrated with their classmates' lack of effort in completing peer review assignments. This finding suggests, as noted earlier, that while students might want peer interaction, their expectations in this area are not being met.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

#### **8.1 Summary**

This endeavor began with a single question that will not be answered in this dissertation. “Why are students withdrawing at a higher rate from our online college composition courses?” will likely be the primary question in much of my research for the rest of my career. It is one that will not likely have an answer, and if it does it will be ever changing. However, I feel that it is necessary to ask it even when I know there may never be a satisfying answer. This study is an example of that belief. In order to hypothesize an answer to that question, my section question was, “Is there a relationship between expectations and retention in our online college composition courses?” I can confidently say that the answer to that question is “Student expectations might be one of the many pieces that go to the puzzle of student retention.” Hedging confidence. I say that because, like most studies in retention, results are mixed and as complex as the students being studied. It is not, however, hopeless.

#### **8.2 Communication Findings, Limitations, and the Future**

The results of the questionnaire communication items suggest that many students in online First-Year Composition courses do expect to communicate with both instructors and peers and to put effort into those communications. Notably, however, students expected to communicate more frequently with peers than instructors but ended up reporting, at the end of the semester, that they communicated more with instructors than with peers. The course requirements also did not provide as many communication opportunities as expected. When considering this in light of student frustrations with a lack of overall effort in the peer review process, it is possible that a lack of opportunity and quality communication left students less than

satisfied with their peer interactions. “Interactions” was an area of online communication that many students felt was lacking both from peers and some instructors. It was noted that some students indicated that they had instructors who went above and beyond what they expected as far as communication goes and others expressed frustration at a lack of communication. This stresses how important the instructor is in the online course community.

Whether or not these unmet expectations impacted success is murky for a few reasons that are related to study limitations. The first is that unmet peer communication frequency could result in less success because of a lack of community or more success because it indicates less work for the student. This finding is important because, as discussed, one of the key features of a difficult class for students was workload. If a course ends up not having the expected workload, it may be perceived as easier. This area is something that could be explored in the future by being more specific in the questioning and directly taking the frequencies from the course. Because of the last minute changes to the study, I was not prepared to collect data from Blackboard that would coordinate with the questionnaire. This resulted in more work for myself. Being able to pull frequencies directly from Blackboard and using them in the questionnaire and interview would create a more streamline process, and would allow for more specific questions. For example, I could ask students to differentiate between social and academic communication with peers and whether or not each would build a community. This would help to begin defining how students view the online course community and how it is built. Asking students if they would complete ungraded social responses would be another angle.

Another limitation may have been not including enough examples of what I meant by communication with the instructor. This area would also benefit from more specific questions. For example, asking students whether or not they view instructor feedback or announcements as

communication, whether they value that type of interaction, and how they expect to communicate with the instructor would all be questions that would help flesh out a more complete picture of student expectations of instructor communication. If the instructor communication section were to be repeated, it would be ideal to ask students about each type of communication that they might have with instructors.

Finally, in hindsight, grades for individual assignments should have been collected. Because of the last minute switch, I neglected to make sure permission to collect that information was clear. Because it was not, it was not collected. In the future, this information would be useful in comparing student effort expectations to response grades.

### **8.3 Participation Findings, Limitations, and the Future**

Students expect to have to put time and effort into the coursework as well. The only responses to time and effort questions that have a relationship with course length are the amount of time students expect to spend on coursework. This finding was interesting both because communication frequency and participation frequency expected by the course do in fact differ dependent on course length and the amount of time students expected to spend did not meet the amount of time the institution expects the students to spend based on course length. Most students expected the course to be at least somewhat difficult. Students thought that a course was difficult based on certain aspects of the course design, what the course content was and what course requirements were, as well as certain factors regarding the instructor and the student. Students did tend to place more responsibility for difficulty on the instructor, but some responsibility for difficulty was also placed on the student. Students expected to learn how to improve writing in general, how to improve specific writing skills, about the subject of writing in general specifically related to specific types of writing, and self-improvement.

Overall, the amount of time students logged into Blackboard was less than what was expected, but the amount of time students reported spending was about the same as they expected. Neither of these results statistically resulted in more successful students. However, with 82% of the students being successful, it is possible that met expectations, or expectations that are unmet but resulted in less work, may have had an impact. Regardless, students did not expect, did not report spending and were not logging into Blackboard for the number of hours that the college expects for the length of the courses they were enrolled in. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the time logged in might be skewed because students were doing work when they were not logged in.

If this portion of the study was to be done again, asking students more specifically about how they expect to and did spend their time might be more productive. For example, asking students how much time they expect to spend posting to the discussion board, writing essays, responding to classmates, reading course materials, reading announcements, reading feedback, etc. may help result in more answers than questions. Interestingly, despite spending less time logged in, students were logging in more frequently. However, this result might be because students were getting kicked out of Blackboard more frequently than expected, which would be an important question to ask. Importantly, though, all but one unsuccessful student had expectations met, so it could also be that the successful students were simply more persistent when facing struggles. Overall, most of the successful students were also required to participate less frequently by the course requirements. Again, less work than expected might equal more success.

As mentioned, the participation frequency data had to be converted to the categories set up by the questionnaire in order to make them compatible. This issue was one of the most

significant limitations in this study. Ideally, the participation frequency data would come directly from the course. It did, but only for ENG111 8-week classes, as those are the classes I had direct access to from past courses taught. In the initial design, the study was only looking at student expectations of participation frequency and reported frequency in the interview, but the last minute changes allowed for more detailed participation information to come from Blackboard, and it was not possible to launch the questionnaire on schedule and make those changes. In the future, establishing the Blackboard access and seeing all of the courses before hand would create a more ideal analysis situation. Additionally, more specific questions about different types of participation would benefit this portion of the study as well.

While there was no statistically significant shift between student expectations and perceptions of course difficulty, almost all of the successful students reported the courses as the same difficulty or easier. Interestingly, however, all of the unsuccessful students reported the same difficulty as expected despite indicating that the reason for not being successful was an inability to keep up. There were also no statistically significant results between expected and reported learning; however, there were a couple of interesting individual findings. One of the unsuccessful students who indicated that they did not learn what was expected because of poor performance in the course indicated that they did not expect much to begin with in the questionnaire. There was also a student who was unsuccessful but indicated that learning expectations were met. Whether this means that they learned what they felt necessary or if they anticipated learning what was expected if the course had not been dropped is impossible to tell.

#### **8.4 Impact of Online Findings, Limitations, and the Future**

Students enrolled in these online courses due to time constraints, because of academic reasons, and due to geographical reasons. While these reasons did not statistically impact

success, it is important to consider that time constraints are subjective and that having students define them would be a possible direction for future research. Students' abilities to juggle outside responsibilities will be different. A larger sample size may have also allowed me to more accurately determine the statistical significance of the impact of reasons for online enrollment on success.

Additionally, many students expected the online format to be different. Some consider the differences to be positive and some consider the differences to be negative. Those that expected differences expected the platforms to be different noted differences in execution, interaction, personal learning preferences and responsibility. Interestingly, those who did not expect the platforms to be largely different noted similarities in execution, instructor interaction, and materials. While there were not any significant changes in the similarities and differences identified in the questionnaire and interview responses, there were some changes, for some students, in attitude toward online learning. Some students shifted toward a negative attitude and others shifted positive one. An interesting finding in this portion of the study was that some students had a negative attitude toward the type of interaction online and felt it was less interactive while others had a positive attitude and felt it was more interactive. This disconnect might be the result of different instructors, and if a similar study were to be conducted, it might be useful to try and study courses offered by a single instructor or receive permission to collect data on instructor interaction. Additionally, the data supports the idea that attitude can impact success as two of the unsuccessful students came in with and left with a negative attitude toward online courses.

Finally, most students felt at least somewhat knowledgeable about online courses and learned about online courses from NOVA sources, personal relationships, web research or

previous personal experience. When considering these expectations in light of the reported preparedness students felt at the end of the semester, there was no statistical significance in a relationship between previous knowledge and preparation. There is also no relationship between previous knowledge about online courses and success. However, all of the students who were successful reported feeling prepared for the challenges of online learning while two thirds of those who were not successful reported not feeling prepared. Whether or not feeling unprepared caused students to be unsuccessful or was caused by a lack of success cannot be determined.

Regardless, when considering the outliers, it is important to note that these results may be the result of confusion over what constitutes “knowledge of online courses.” As suggested in Chapter 6, when there is a student indicating not feeling prepared at the end but feeling somewhat knowledgeable at the beginning, there is a problem. This problem could be the study. The questionnaire item could be rephrased to more closely match the interview question. This matching was not done initially because I was trying not to lead students into believing there would be challenges (I did not want to impact the results). However, this might have made a difference. On the other hand, it could be that the information that students are being given about online courses is not painting the full picture.

### **8.5 Perceptions and Perspectives Findings, Limitations, and the Future**

One of the most important findings from the chapter that focused on perceptions and perspectives was that all of the students who completed the questionnaire, except one, had at least one risk factor based on retention literature. Many had two. This finding begs the question: what made the difference? Those students who were unsuccessful did not have any more risk factors than those who were successful. In the future, adding more participants would be the best way to retest the questions statistically.



A second important finding from this section was that some students were not necessarily considering success and performance to have similar meanings. Many successful students indicated that certain life events impacted their performance suggesting that, though they did well in the course, they did not perform as well as they felt they could or should have. While this finding is interesting, a limitation of the study was that there was not enough data to come to any conclusions about it. In future research, both the questionnaire and the interview would need more specific questions that ask students to define success and performance separately. The final important finding from this chapter was that students felt frustrated with the lack of peer effort in the required peer reviews. When considering that peer and instructor interaction were factors that students indicated impacted performance and that students expected to communicate with peers frequently, this frustration may have been a fairly significant one. In future research on peer interaction in the online courses, asking students about the impact of the peer review process on their performance may provide useful data.

### **8.6 Overall Findings, Limitations, and the Future**

Overall, there were no statistically significant results when comparing student expectations about communication, participation frequency, time spent, course difficulty or learning outcomes to their success in the course. However, many of the resulting cross-tabulations suggest that a small sample size might in fact be resulting in a Type II error. This issue suggests that not only should a larger sample size be obtained in order to re-test these statistics, but that some of them may need a closer, more qualitative analysis.

Most student expectations were met by student reported experiences in instructor communication, participation, difficulty, learning, and overall. Most expectations were not met by Blackboard data in the areas of participation and communication. Overall, it seems that while

student expectations are not necessarily being met by the course, the student perspective is that these expectations are being met. This perception did seem to result in successful final grades. Of the 26 students tracked, plus the two untracked students who completed the interview but did not agree to be tracked, there were only five students (18%) who withdrew or failed the course. The remaining students earned grades of *C* or better (NOVA does not assign +/-). However, it is possible that knowing that they did well resulted in feeling satisfied with the course. Also, the institutional expectations of students based on a select few of the common predictive factors of success are not statistically predictive of final grades.

There were two significant overall limitations in this study. The first was the last minute changes to the methodology. How this impacted the individual components of the study was discussed earlier in this chapter. Ultimately, if run again, the questions would be built from the course outward. The second limitation was the lack of access to the unsuccessful students. While 18% is better than expected, the goal of this study was to focus on the unsuccessful students. With only five respondents, that was not possible for a study this size. It is possible that maybe the incentive was not the right type. Maybe a gas gift card or just a visa gift card would have been more enticing. However, it is more likely that I am just not in the right position to be able to track these students down. As a strictly online adjunct at a community college, my ability to reach out to students who are not my own is very limited. These are the students who likely have even less time and are less motivated than many of the students who participated in this study. In the future, I would like to be in a position to have greater access to this understudied group.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

# **OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY** **APPLICATION FOR EXEMPT RESEARCH**

Note: For research projects regulated by or supported by the Federal Government, submit through IRBNet to the Institutional Review Board. Otherwise, submit to your college human subjects committee.

<b>Responsible Project Investigator (RPI)</b> The RPI must be a member of ODU faculty or staff who will serve as the project supervisor and be held accountable for all aspects of the project. Students cannot be listed as RPIs.		
<b>First Name:</b> Julia	<b>Middle Initial:</b>	<b>Last Name:</b> Romberger
<b>Telephone:</b> [REDACTED]	<b>Fax Number:</b>	<b>E-mail:</b> JRomberg@odu.edu
<b>Office Address:</b> BAL 5024		
<b>City:</b> Norfolk	<b>State:</b> VA	<b>Zip:</b> [REDACTED]
<b>Department:</b> English		<b>College:</b> Arts & Letters
<b>Complete Title of Research Project:</b> The Unretained: Perspective of the Online First-Year Composition Student		<b>Code Name (One word):</b> Unretained
<b>Investigators</b> Individuals who are directly responsible for any of the following: the project's design, implementation, consent process, data collection, and data analysis. If more investigators exist than lines provided, please attach a separate list.		
<b>First Name:</b> Catrina	<b>Middle Initial:</b>	<b>Last Name:</b> Mitchum
<b>Telephone:</b> [REDACTED]	<b>Fax Number:</b>	<b>Email:</b> cmitc022@odu.edu
<b>Office Address:</b> [REDACTED]		
<b>City:</b> [REDACTED]	<b>State:</b> [REDACTED]	<b>Zip:</b> [REDACTED]
<b>Affiliation:</b> ___ Faculty    ___x_ Graduate Student    ___ Undergraduate Student ___ Staff    ___ Other		
<b>First Name:</b>	<b>Middle Initial:</b>	<b>Last Name:</b>
<b>Telephone:</b>	<b>Fax Number:</b>	<b>Email:</b>
<b>Office Address:</b>		
<b>City:</b>	<b>State:</b>	<b>Zip:</b>
<b>Affiliation:</b> ___ Faculty    ___ Graduate Student    ___ Undergraduate Student ___ Staff    ___ Other		
List additional investigators on attachment and check here: ___		

Type of Research
<p><b>1. This study is being conducted as part of (check all that apply):</b></p> <p> <input type="checkbox"/> Faculty Research           <input type="checkbox"/> Non-Thesis Graduate Student Research  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Doctoral Dissertation           <input type="checkbox"/> Honors or Individual Problems Project  <input type="checkbox"/> Masters Thesis           <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____         </p>
Funding
<p><b>2. Is this research project externally funded or contracted for by an agency or institution which is independent of the university? Remember, if the project receives ANY federal support, then the project CANNOT be reviewed by a College Committee and MUST be reviewed by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).</b></p> <p> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes (If yes, indicate the granting or contracting agency and provide identifying information.)  <input type="checkbox"/> No         </p> <p> <b>Agency Name:</b> Council of Writing Program Administrators  <b>Mailing Address:</b> cwpa.research.grants@gmail.com  <b>Point of Contact:</b> Chuck Paine         </p> <p><b>*Note:</b> I have not received funding, but have submitted a proposal for funding. The proposal packet has been included with the materials. The pilot will not be funded, and if funding is received an update will be submitted.</p>
Research Dates
<p> <b>3a. Date you wish to start research (MM/DD/YY)</b>    __06__/_20__/_15__  <b>3b. Date you wish to end research (MM/DD/YY)</b>    __01__/_30__/_17__          NOTE: Exempt projects do not have expiration dates and do not require submission of a Progress Report after 1 year.       </p>
Human Subjects Review
<p><b>4. Has this project been reviewed by any other committee (university, governmental, private sector) for the protection of human research participants?</b></p> <p> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No         </p> <p><b>4a. If yes, is ODU conducting the primary review?</b></p> <p> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes  <input type="checkbox"/> No (If no go to 4b)         </p>



**4b. Who is conducting the primary review?**

**5. Attach a description of the following items:**

☐ Description of the Proposed Study  
☐ Research Protocol  
☐ References  
☐ Any Letters, Flyers, Questionnaires, etc. which will be distributed to the study subjects or other study participants  
☐ If the research is part of a research proposal submitted for federal, state or external funding, submit a copy of the FULL proposal (**\*Note: The pilot study will not be funded**)

Note: The description should be in sufficient detail to allow the Human Subjects Review Committee to determine if the study can be classified as EXEMPT under Federal Regulations 45CFR46.101(b).

**Exemption categories**

**6. Identify which of the 6 federal exemption categories below applies to your research proposal and explain**

**why the proposed research meets the category. Federal law 45 CFR 46.101(b) identifies the following EXEMPT categories. Check all that apply and provide comments.**

SPECIAL NOTE: The exemptions at 45 CFR 46.101(b) do not apply to research involving prisoners, fetuses, pregnant women, or human in vitro fertilization. The exemption at 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), for research involving survey or interview procedures or observation of public behavior, does not apply to research with children, except for research involving observations of public behavior when the investigator(s) do not participate in the activities being observed.

\_\_\_\_(6.1) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

**Comments:**

  X  (6.2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; AND (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

**Comments:**

**This study will use both survey and interview procedures to gather information about students expectations of and reasons for leaving online first-year composition courses. The information obtained for survey participants will be anonymous unless participants agree to participate in the follow-up interview. The participants that agree to be interviewed will only be able to be identified through codes created by the researcher. After analysis is complete, the code key will be destroyed. If any participant interview responses were to be disclosed outside of the research, there are no foreseeable risks of criminal or civil liability and the responses would not be damaging to the subjects' financial standing employability or reputation.**

\_\_\_\_(6.3) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under paragraph (b)(2) of this section, if:

(i) The human subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.

**Comments:**

\_\_\_\_(6.4) Research, involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

**Comments:**

\_\_\_\_ (6.5) Does not apply to the university setting; do not use it

\_\_\_\_(6.6) Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

**Comments:**

7. All investigators (including graduate students enrolled in Thesis and Dissertation projects involving human subjects) must document completion of the CITI Human Subject Protection course.  
(Attach a copy of all CITI Human Subject Protection completion certificates.)  
Date RPI completed Human Subject Protection training: \_\_March 2013\_\_

**PLEASE NOTE:**

1536. You may begin research when the College Committee or Institutional Review Board gives notice of its approval.

1537. You MUST inform the College Committee or Institutional Review Board of ANY changes in method or procedure that may conceivably alter the exempt status of the project.

☒ Description of the Proposed Study

☒ Research Protocol

☒ References

☒ Any Letters, Flyers, Questionnaires, etc. which will be distributed to the study subjects or other study participants

### **Description of Proposed Study**

Publications like the Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Education have a vast collection of articles, blogs, research and letters to the editor that focus on student retention. The areas of focus are on how to increase or improve retention/whether or not it can be done (Parry, 2010; Jenkins, 2012; Pang, 2010; Hoover, 2007; Hoover, 2015; Straumsheim, 2013), discussions of the contributing factors to retaining students (Brownstein, 2000; Bartlett, 2002; Hoover, 2015; Glenn, 2010; Reed, 2015; Mintz, 2014; Sternberg, 2013), why retention matters and to whom it should matter (Fain, 2012; Hoover, 2007; Hoover, 2007) and the fact that students are not as successful in online courses (Jaschik, 2015).

The field is vast, but this study will focus on online courses because, across higher education, online classes have a lower retention rate (Dietz-Uhler, Fisher & Han, 2007; Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner & Ison, 2003; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Parker, 1999; Parry, 2010; Jenkins, 2012). This study will specifically focus on online retention in First-Year Composition (FYC) because scholarship has shown that the first-year of college is critical to overall student success (Nichols, 2010; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Griffith, 1995; Crissman, 2001; Brownstein, 2000) and this places FYC in an interesting position to have an impact on student success. Online classes are sometimes considered the alternative while face-to-face is the default or preferred method of taking college courses. Determining why students are enrolling, what they're expecting and why they're leaving these classes might be contributing factors to increasing the number of students that stay.

#### *Research Questions:*

- Why are students withdrawing, dropping or stopping participation in First-year composition courses online?

- Is there a relationship between students' expectations and experiences of these online courses?

I want to study the retention of first year composition students in online courses using questionnaires and interviews. I hope to find out why the students that withdraw or stop participating leave and determine if this has anything to do expectations differing from experience.

#### *The Literature Gap:*

Retention studies has spent a lot of time investigating student characteristics as predictors of success (Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Nichols, 2010; Finnegan, et. al., 2009; Boston, et. al., 2012; Fike & Fike, 2008; Parker, 1999). However, few studies give students the opportunity to express opinions about their own success. Retention is an important topic in FYC research because the goal of retention is education (Powell, 2013; Web-Sunderhaus, 2010; Brunk-Chavez & Frederickson, 2008; Fike & Fike, 2008) and there are close ties between FYC and the institution (Powell, 2013; Web-Sunderhaus, 2010; Powell, 2009; Griffith, 1995; Brunk-Chavez & Frederickson, 2008); however, retention scholarship out of English Studies is scarce (Powell, 2013; Web-Sunderhaus, 2010; Brunk-Chavez & Frederickson, 2008; Bergin, 2012). Investigating the perspectives of students deemed unsuccessful in an online FYC class might provide more explanation for why our students are leaving. In this study, I'm aiming to gain the reasons for leaving from those who have left in the hope that it might help us to figure out how to help those students stay or help them return when the time is right for them.

#### **Protocol:**

##### *Context and Participants:*

Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC, but commonly referred to as NOVA) is a multi-campus institution located across the northern part of the state of Virginia. Though the courses being studied are offered online, the campus that the courses are offered through is in Annandale, VA. NOVA Annandale serves approximately 23,000 students a year and the online courses at Annandale are offered through a NOVA-wide program called the Extended Learning Institute (ELI). ELI is responsible for designing (with help from content specialists across campuses) and maintaining all NOVA offered online courses. All ELI courses are evaluated using Quality Matters Peer Review.

Quality Matters is a nationally recognized for-profit organization that provides a comprehensive rubric intended to be used in the design of online courses. The rubric is based on research in online studies. All ELI courses are also "canned," meaning that the courses come pre-designed with the exception of inserting dates and faculty information. Because course design is one of the factors that can impact retention, using the same course design with different instructors accounts for any differences in design that might affect a student's success whether perceived or real.

Each semester, NOVA Annandale offers approximately 13-15 sections of ENG111-College Composition I and ENG112-College Composition II through ELI. The student cap for each class is 27. The participants in this study will be students enrolled in ENG111 or ENG112 in the Spring 2016 semester at NOVA Annandale campus through ELI. The desired number of students that will participate in the survey is approximately 30 and the desired number of students for the interviews is around 15.

If I do not receive enough student participation for the Spring 2016 semester, I will run the study again in the Fall of 2016 and combine the results. For the purposes of this study,

retained students will be students that have earned a passing grade (“D” or higher) in their ENG111 or ENG112 course. Unretained students will include those students who have withdrawn, stopped participating in the course (to include students who have earned an “F” but only due to no longer “attending”).

*Establishing contact with instructors and students:*

I have arranged to receive, from the Assistant Dean of Composition at the Annandale campus of NOVA, a list of instructors that will be teaching Eng111 or Eng112 during the Spring 2016 semester. I will contact instructors via email in early November of 2015 to ask for volunteers to post my questionnaire in their courses (Appendix A). I will request that the participation request (Appendix B) and questionnaire (Appendix C) be sent as an email a week before and three days before class starts. The questionnaire will ask for contact information outside of the school email in order to improve chances of successfully contacting students should they be unsuccessful in the course. It will also contain electronic consent for the instructor to provide me with data of “unsuccessful” students (Appendix D). I will request that instructors complete a progress report every 2-3 weeks (depending on course length) that will indicate the last date of attendance and whether or not the student has withdrawn. Students will then be contacted for the interviews based on the coded list provided by the instructor.

*Instruments*

*Questionnaire:*

All students in all sections of all courses being studied will be requested to complete a 23 question questionnaire at the beginning of the course (Appendix C). The purpose of administering the questionnaire is to establish expectations of online first-year composition courses from the students’ perspective. The questionnaire will also ask for contact information outside of the college system in the event that the student can no longer be reached through college communication resources, and will request permission from the student for the instructor to provide the researcher with information about student participation and grades throughout the semester (Appendix D). This consent will satisfy the FERPA requirements as the student is allowing the information to be shared for the purposes of the study.

The questionnaires will be designed using surveymonkey and will be administered by having instructors email the request to participate to their students (Appendix B). Surveys work well for collecting data on expectations because they allow for both multiple choice and short answer responses. It should help establish some demographic information and expectations before classes begin.

*Interviews:*

The interviews will begin as soon as students begin dropping the course. Because NOVA no longer has a late enrollment policy, this will likely happen the first week of classes. The interviews will be approximately 20 minutes and will focus on finding the reasons that students have dropped the composition courses (Appendix E). The participants will be given the choice between an email or a telephone interview and if they are not responsive to the preferred method, the other form of interview will be attempted.

The interview questions have been written by the researcher, and the email interviews will be sent using the researcher’s Old Dominion University email account. The email interviews are a good option for this population as online students tend to be very busy and this might result in more responses. However, because writing might be a part of the reason students are not successful, telephone interviews will also be offered and conducted. The telephone interviews will be conducted by the Social Science Research Center (SSRC) at Old Dominion University.

The calls will be both recorded and transcribed and the data will be entered into NVivo. Telephone interviews are a good option for collecting this type of data from this population because this population might not be inclined to fill out a questionnaire for lack of motivation, might be embarrassed about their situation and need further prompting, and might respond most positively to a dialogue. This method is also most useful for this type of data collection because it does allow for more open ended follow up questions that allow the interviewee to provide more information. The cost of the telephone interviews through the SSRC will be approximately \$450-\$1100. The key in qualitative research is flexibility, transparency and “emerging methods” (Sullivan & Porter, 1997; Selfe & Hawisher, 2012; Creswell, 2012 & 2013; Teston, 2007). It’s important to adjust as the study is going on. Therefore, I will keep in close contact with those conducting my interviews in order to change and add questions, such as probes, as needed throughout the process (Creswell, 2012).

#### *Incentive:*

Because first-year composition students online might be less inclined to participate in a voluntary study, my request for participation will include an offer to be entered into a drawing for 1 of 4 \$50 Amazon giftcards. Because those that are no longer taking the class or stopped participating may be even less inclined, the same offer will be made to those who volunteer for the interview making the total incentive cost \$400.

#### *The Pilot Study:*

In the Summer of 2015, the researcher will be running a pilot study with a section of ENGL211 at Old Dominion University. The pilot will differ from the Spring 2016 study in the following ways:

1. the course is being offered at Old Dominion University instead of NOVA;
2. the offered incentive will be a drawing for 1 \$25 Amazon gift card for completion of the questionnaire and 1 for the completion of the interview;
3. all wording in the questionnaire and interviews will be changed to reflect both the change in course name (ENG111/112 to ENGL211) and student services offered;
4. the researcher will be conducting the telephone interviews (instead of the SSRC).

While the target population is different for the pilot study, conducting the pilot will allow the researcher to determine if any changes need to be made in the wording of questions in order to gather the data required to answer the research questions.

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## Materials to be Distributed (Appendices)

### **Appendix A**

#### *Email to Instructors Requesting Participation*

Dear Instructor,

I am currently a PhD Candidate at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA, and I am working on my dissertation. I'm an ELI adjunct with the English Department at the Annandale campus as well. My dissertation is on retention in online first-year composition courses, and I'm specifically focusing on the perspective of the students who are not being "retained." I'm hoping that starting to understand student expectations toward these courses and how those expectations match with their experiences and perceptions of success may help shed some light on why we lose so many of our students online. I've created a survey with open and closed ended questions and have IRB approval.

I am asking for your assistance in the Spring 2016 semester. I would need you to send my request for participation to students via email about a week before classes started, and then again about 3 days before classes start. After that, I would need you to fill out a quick survey every 3 weeks about student attendance and withdraw. The survey would be a Google Form that would allow you to enter/select the last date of attendance for each student that has agreed to participate. If this is something you are willing to do, please email me at [cmitchum@nvcc.edu](mailto:cmitchum@nvcc.edu).

Thank you for your help!

Catrina Mitchum

### **Appendix B**

#### *Email to Students Requesting Participation*

Dear ENG111/112 Students,

I'm an ELI instructor with NOVA Annandale, and I'm also a PhD student at Old Dominion University in Virginia. I'm researching student success in online first-year composition courses at NOVA Annandale, and I need student volunteers that are willing to take a quick survey and

possibly participate in a follow up interview. Your participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and you will not be forced to answer any of the questions. However, I would sincerely appreciate honest and complete answers.

As a “Thank you” for your time, completing the survey will give you the opportunity to enter a drawing for 1 of 4 \$50 Amazon giftcards. After completing the survey, you will have 2 options to enter your personal information for the drawing. The first will enter you into the drawing and allow me to contact you in the future for an interview. The second option will only enter you into the drawing and once the drawing is complete, your information will be deleted. The third option opts out of the drawing entirely.

If you are willing to participate in the survey, please click the following link: insert link.

Thank you,

Catrina Mitchum  
English Studies Doctoral Candidate  
Old Dominion University  
NOVA ELI Faculty  
[609-425-7968](tel:609-425-7968)  
[cmite022@odu.edu](mailto:cmite022@odu.edu)

### ***Appendix C*** ***Consent for Questionnaire***

#### **Overview:**

The purpose of this study is to examine student success in online first-year composition classes. The study is being conducted by Catrina Mitchum, a PhD Candidate at Old Dominion University; Shelley Rodrigo, Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Arizona and Julia Romberger, Associate Professor in the Department of English at Old Dominion University. You’re being invited to participate in the study because you have enrolled in an online section of ENG111 or ENG112 through NOVA Annandale.

#### **Participation:**

There are two steps in participating. The first is to complete the questionnaire, and the second is consenting to be contacted for a possible follow-up interview. The online questionnaire should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time or skip questions you don’t feel comfortable answering.

#### **Incentives, Risks, and Benefits:**

As a “Thank you” for your time, completing the questionnaire will give you the opportunity to enter a drawing for 1 of 4 \$50 Amazon giftcards. After completing the questionnaire, you will have 2 options to enter your personal information for the drawing. The first option will enter you into the drawing and allow me to contact you in the future for an interview. If you select this option, the questionnaire will not be anonymous, but every effort will be taken to protect your

information. As soon as your responses are assigned a code, the code will be used to identify your responses on the questionnaire and the interview from then on. The second option will only enter you into the drawing and once the drawing is complete, your information will be deleted. The third option opts out of the drawing entirely. If you decide to participate in the second step of the study, your information will remain confidential by using password protected storage for the data and the coding system mentioned above. Aside from potential data breaches, there are no known risks to participating in this study. The benefits are that the study is being conducted in the hope that beginning to understand student success in online first-year composition classes might result in more students being successful in these courses.

### **After the study:**

The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes and any publication of the study results will not include any identifiable information. This study has been reviewed by Old Dominion University in accordance with the IRB standards for research involving human participants.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:

Catrina Mitchum  
[cmitc022@odu.edu](mailto:cmitc022@odu.edu)

### **Electronic Consent:**

By checking this box, you are indicating that you have read the information above and you are voluntarily participating in the first step of the study, the questionnaire.

By checking this box, you are indicating that you do not wish to participate.

### *Questionnaire Questions*

1. How many weeks is the ENG111/112 course that you're enrolled in?
  - a. 16-weeks
  - b. 8-weeks
  - c. 12-weeks
2. Why did you choose to take the online version of ENG111/112?
3. How often do you expect to communicate via email or course tools with your peers? (For example, asking questions, responding to questions, etc.)
  - a. Every Day
  - b. A few days a week
  - c. Once a week
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Once during the semester
  - f. Not at all

- g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
4. How often do you expect to communicate via email or course tools with your instructor?  
(For example, asking questions, responding to questions, etc.)
- a. Every Day
  - b. A few days a week
  - c. Once a week
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Once during the semester
  - f. Not at all
  - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
5. How much effort do you expect to put into these communications?
- a. Maximum Effort
  - b. Significant Effort
  - c. Average Effort
  - d. Minimal Effort
  - e. No Effort
6. How often do you expect to participate (including posting, reading, writing, brainstorming) in the course?
- a. More than once a day
  - b. Once every Day
  - c. 3-5 days a week
  - d. Once a week
  - e. Every other week
  - f. Once a month
  - g. Once during the semester
  - h. Not at all
  - i. Other\_\_\_\_\_
7. How much time do you expect to put into completing your assigned coursework?
- a. 0 hours a week
  - b. 1-3 hours a week
  - c. 4-6 hours a week
  - d. 7-9 hours a week
  - e. 10-12 hours a week
  - f. 13-15 hours a week
  - g. 16-18 hours a week
  - h. more than 18 hours a week
8. How much effort do you expect to put into completing your assigned coursework?
- a. Maximum Effort
  - b. Significant Effort

- c. Average Effort
  - d. Minimal Effort
  - e. No Effort
9. How easy/difficult do you expect the course to be?
- a. Very Difficult
  - b. Difficult
  - c. Somewhat Difficult
  - d. Somewhat Easy
  - e. Easy
  - f. Very Easy
  - g. I'm not sure what to expect
10. What makes a class easy or difficult?
11. What do you expect to learn about writing in this course?
12. Are you expecting your experience to be different than taking ENG111/112 face-to-face?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
13. Why or why not?
14. Before you signed up for ENG111/ENG112, how much did you know about taking online courses?
- a. I am very knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
  - b. I am somewhat knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
  - c. I am not very knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
  - d. I am not at all knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
15. How/where did you learn about taking online courses?
16. How much total financial aid are you receiving this semester?
- a. \$0
  - b. \$1-\$500
  - c. \$501-\$1000
  - d. \$1001-\$1500
  - e. \$1501-\$2000
  - f. \$2001-\$2500
  - g. Other: Please Specify
17. How much support do you feel you receive from friends and family? (Support, in this question, means having the necessary help you need to be able to complete your school work. That might be financial support, emotional support, a physical space to work in, and/or something like helping out with childcare or housework.)
- a. I receive a lot of support from friends and family
  - b. I receive an average amount of support from friends and family
  - c. I receive some support from friends and family
  - d. I receive little support from friends and family

- e. I receive no support from friends and family
18. ELI or NOVA Annandale offer a variety of student support services. Which student support services are you aware of? Please select all that apply
- a. Career Counseling
  - b. Transfer Planning
  - c. Advising and Counseling
  - d. IT Help Desk
  - e. Cooperative Education & Internships
  - f. Library Services
  - g. College Pathway Initiatives
  - h. Disability Services
  - i. GPA Calculator
  - j. GPS for Success
  - k. Open Computer Labs
  - l. Student Handbook
  - m. Student Services Center Locations
  - n. Testing Centers
  - o. Online Tutoring Services
  - p. Campus Tutoring Services
  - q. Free Software Downloads
  - r. Cloud Printing and Storage
  - s. Veteran's Affairs
  - t. International Student Resources
19. How did you learn about these services?
20. If you remember, what was your high-school GPA?
- a. 3.5 or above (most B+/A-/ A)
  - b. 3.0-3.49 (mostly B/B+)
  - c. 2.5-2.99 (mostly C+/B-)
  - d. 2.0-2.49 (mostly C/C+)
  - e. 1.5-1.99 (mostly D+/C-)
  - f. 1.0-1.49 (mostly D/D+)
  - g. .5-.99 (mostly F/D-)
  - h. 0-.49 (mostly F)
  - i. Can't remember
21. What is your current GPA? If you're not sure, you can open a new browser, login to My NOVA, click on "VCCS SIS: Student Information System," click on "Academic

Records,” click on “View Unofficial Transcript,” then select “Student Unofficial” in the “Report Type” dropbox, then select “Go.” Your GPA is located in your unofficial transcript.

Please Enter GPA or “Unsure”:

22. Please indicate the highest level of education your parents have received.

- a. Mother
  - i. Did not graduate HS
  - ii. Graduated HS or received GED
  - iii. Completed Some college
  - iv. Completed Associates Degree
  - v. Completed Bachelor’s Degree
  - vi. Completed Graduate Degree
  - vii. Other
  - viii. I don’t know
- b. Father
  - i. Did not graduate HS
  - ii. Graduated HS or received GED
  - iii. Completed Some college
  - iv. Completed Associates Degree
  - v. Completed Bachelor’s Degree
  - vi. Completed Graduate Degree
  - vii. Other
  - viii. I don’t know

23. What year did you graduate High School or receive your GED?

## ***Appendix D***

### ***Consent to be Contacted for Interviews***

By checking this box, I agree to be contacted during the Spring Semester 2016 for an interview regarding my success in ENG111/112. I also agree to allow my instructor to provide the investigator with monthly progress reports that will include a coded number assigned to me, my participation level and my current overall grade. I understand that this information will be coded and shared on a secure network. My information will be protected, and I will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. I will be entered into an additional drawing when my interview has been completed.

By checking this box, I do not agree to be interviewed later, but I would like to be entered into the drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. I understand that the information collected on the next page will only be used for the purposes of the drawing and will be deleted when the drawing is complete.

By checking this box, I do not agree to be interviewed and I would not like to be entered into the drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card.

## ***Appendix E***

### *Interview Language and Questions*

Hello, thank you for agreeing to participate in the follow-up interview. As I mentioned in the email and questionnaire at the beginning of the semester, I am working on a project focused on student success in online courses. I am hoping you can help me by allowing me to interview you about your experiences. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can choose not to talk to me at all or you can refuse to answer any question that you do not feel comfortable with. However, I do hope you will help me by answering as truthfully and completely as you can. This interview is not anonymous, as I know who you are and will know how you respond. However, I will keep what I hear confidential and no names or other identifiers will be attached to my notes, the recording or the email, so the information you provide will remain anonymous. Further, I will be talking to about X other people and when I report my findings, I will do so in the aggregate and thereby keep your identity and responses anonymous. Do you have any questions? [If not] Can we proceed with the interview? (Language altered for email interviews:

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in the follow-up interview. As I mentioned in the email and questionnaire at the beginning of the semester, I am working on a project focused on student success in online courses. I am hoping you can help me by allowing me to interview you about your experiences. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can choose not to answer any question that you do not feel comfortable with. However, I do hope you will help me by answering as truthfully and completely as you can. This interview is not anonymous, as I know who you are and will know how you respond. However, I will keep what you type confidential and no names or other identifiers will be attached to the responses, or the email, so the information you provide will remain anonymous.

To complete the interview, you can either download the attached Word document and email it back to me or you can click on the following link: [Student Success Interview](#) and answer the questions there. Whatever is more convenient for you.

As promised, you will be entered into another drawing for a \$25 Amazon gift card and will be contacted via email if you win.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Best,

Catrina Mitchum  
PhD Candidate  
Old Dominion University

Catrina



1. ?What life events (such as a death in the family, illness, additions to the family, etc.) have you experienced since the course started?
  - a. Do you feel it affected your performance in the course?
  - b. Why/why not? How so?
2. Did you learn everything you expected to in the course?
  - a. What was it you were trying to learn?
3. We are contacting you because (it appears) you are no longer active in the course. Why did you [withdraw or stop participating] in the course?
  - a. Were the other students or the instructor a factor?
  - b. Was the course content a factor?
  - c. Was the difficulty level a factor?
  - d. How so?
4. Do you feel you were successful in the course up to the point where you [withdrew or stopped participating]?
  - a. What part of the experience (grades, instructor feedback, confidence) made you feel that way?
5. What do you feel were contributing factors to your performance in the course?
  - a. Do you feel your performance was positive or negative? Why?
  - b. What might have been changed about the course in order to make your performance more positive?
  - c. What frustrations did you encounter?
6. Did your experiences in the course live up to your expectations? (I'm hoping to be able to bring in something from the student's questionnaire here)
  - a. In what ways did your experiences in the course not match your expectations?
  - b. In what ways did they match?
7. In what ways was the online writing course similar to a face-to-face course? In what ways was it different?
  - a. Do you think taking the course face-to-face could have affected your performance?
8. Do you feel you were prepared for the challenges of online learning such as time management, time spent, technical issues, self-discipline, and feeling isolated from peers?
  - a. What might have made you more prepared? or What made you prepared?
9. How often did you communicate with your peers?
  - a. Every Day
  - b. A few days a week
  - c. Once a week
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Once during the semester
  - f. Not at all
  - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_

10. How often did you communicate with your instructor?
  - a. Every Day
  - b. A few days a week
  - c. Once a week
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Once during the semester
  - f. Not at all
  - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
11. How much time did you spend on coursework?
  - a. 0 hours a week
  - b. 1-3 hours a week
  - c. 3-6 hours a week
  - d. 6-9 hours a week
  - e. 9-12 hours a week
  - f. 12-15 hours a week
  - g. 15-18 hours a week
  - h. more than 18 hours a week
12. How difficult was the course?
  - a. Very Difficult
  - b. Difficult
  - c. Somewhat Difficult
  - d. Somewhat Easy
  - e. Easy
  - f. Very Easy
13. Did you get support from friends and family?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
14. Which of the following student services offered at NOVA did you use this semester?
  - a. Career Counseling
  - b. Transfer Planning
  - c. Advising and Counseling
  - d. IT Help Desk
  - e. Cooperative Education & Internships
  - f. Library Services
  - g. College Pathway Initiatives
  - h. Disability Services
  - i. GPA Calculator
  - j. GPS for Success

- k. Open Computer Labs
  - l. Student Handbook
  - m. Student Services Center Locations
  - n. Testing Centers
  - o. Online Tutoring Services
  - p. Campus Tutoring Services
  - q. Free Software Downloads
  - r. Cloud Printing and Storage
  - s. Veteran's Affairs
  - t. International Student Resources
  - u. I did not use any student services
15. Is there anything you think could have helped you complete the course

## **Appendix B**

Catrina Mitchum  
NOVA Faculty Member  
PhD Candidate at Old Dominion University  
Proposal to Conduct Research at Northern Virginia Community College  
Study title: "The Unretained: Perspective of the Online First-Year Composition Student"

**This study has been approved 6/19/2015 for IRB exemption under exemption category 6.2 by the College of Arts and Letters Review Committee at Old Dominion University.**

## **1. Description of Proposed Study**

Publications like the Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Education have a vast collection of articles, blogs, research and letters to the editor that focus on student retention. The areas of focus are on how to increase or improve retention/whether or not it can be done (Parry, 2010; Jenkins, 2012; Pang, 2010; Hoover, 2007; Hoover, 2015; Straumsheim, 2013), discussions of the contributing factors to retaining students (Brownstein, 2000; Bartlett, 2002; Hoover, 2015; Glenn, 2010; Reed, 2015; Mintz, 2014; Sternberg, 2013), why retention matters and to whom it should matter (Fain, 2012; Hoover, 2007; Hoover, 2007) and the fact that students are not as successful in online courses (Jaschik, 2015).

The field is vast, but this study will focus on online courses because, across higher education, online classes have a lower retention rate (Dietz-Uhler, Fisher & Han, 2007; Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner & Ison, 2003; Morris & Finnegan, 2009; Parker, 1999; Parry, 2010; Jenkins, 2012). This study will specifically focus on online retention in First-Year Composition (FYC) because scholarship has shown that the first-year of college is critical to overall student success (Nichols, 2010; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Griffith, 1995; Crissman, 2001; Brownstein, 2000) and this places FYC in an interesting position to have an impact on student success at the institutional level. Online classes are sometimes considered the alternative while face-to-face is the default or preferred method of taking college courses. Determining why students are enrolling, what they're expecting and why they're leaving these classes might be contributing factors to increasing the number of students that stay.

### *Research Questions:*

- Why are students withdrawing, dropping or stopping participation in First-year composition courses online?
- Is there a relationship between students' expectations and experiences of these online courses?

I want to study the retention of first year composition students in online courses at NOVA using questionnaires and interviews. I hope to find out why the students that withdraw or stop participating leave and determine if this has anything to do expectations differing from experience.

### *The Literature Gap:*

The field of retention studies has spent a lot of time investigating student characteristics as predictors of success (Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Nichols, 2010; Finnegan, et. al., 2009; Boston, et. al., 2012; Fike & Fike, 2008; Parker, 1999). However, few studies give students the opportunity to express opinions about their own success. Retention is an important topic in FYC research because the goal of retention is education (Powell, 2013; Web-Sunderhaus, 2010; Brunk-Chavez & Frederickson, 2008; Fike & Fike, 2008) and there are close ties between FYC and the institution (Powell, 2013; Web-Sunderhaus, 2010; Powell, 2009; Griffith, 1995; Brunk-Chavez & Frederickson, 2008); however, retention scholarship out of English Studies is scarce (Powell, 2013; Web-Sunderhaus, 2010; Brunk-Chavez & Frederickson, 2008; Bergin, 2012).

Investigating the perspectives of students deemed unsuccessful in an online FYC class might provide more explanation for why our students are leaving. In this study, I'm aiming to gain the reasons for leaving from those who have left in the hope that it might help us to figure out how to help those students stay or help them return when the time is right for them.

### **Protocol:**

#### *Context and Participants:*

Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC, but commonly referred to as NOVA) is a multi-campus institution located across the northern part of the state of Virginia. Though the courses being studied are offered online, the campus that the courses are offered through is in Annandale, VA. NOVA Annandale serves approximately 23,000 students a year and the online courses at Annandale are offered through a NOVA-wide program called the Extended Learning Institute (ELI). ELI is responsible for designing (with help from content specialists across campuses) and maintaining all NOVA offered online courses. All ELI courses are evaluated using Quality Matters Peer Review.

Quality Matters is a nationally recognized for-profit organization that provides a comprehensive rubric intended to be used in the design of online courses. The rubric is based on research in online studies. All ELI courses are also "canned," meaning that the courses come pre-designed with the exception of inserting dates and faculty information. Because course design is one of the factors that can impact retention, using the same course design with different instructors accounts for any differences in design that might affect a student's success whether perceived or real.

Each semester, NOVA Annandale offers approximately 13-15 sections of ENG111-College Composition I and ENG112-College Composition II through ELI. The student cap for each class is 27. The participants in this study will be students enrolled in ENG111 or ENG112 in the Spring 2016 semester at NOVA Annandale campus through ELI. The desired number of students that will participate in the survey is approximately 30 and the desired number of students for the interviews is around 15.

If I do not receive enough student participation for the Spring 2016 semester, I will run the study again in the Fall of 2016 and combine the results. For the purposes of this study, retained students will be students that have earned a passing grade ("D" or higher) in their ENG111 or ENG112 course. Unretained students will include those students who have withdrawn or stopped participating in the course (to include students who have earned an "F" due to a lack of participation, but will not include students who have earned an "F" and completed the course). The unretained students will be interviewed if they have previously provided consent to have their participation tracked and their final grade reported.

#### *Establishing contact with instructors and students:*

I have arranged to receive, from the Assistant Dean of Composition at the Annandale campus of NOVA, a list of instructors that will be teaching Eng111 or Eng112 during the Spring 2016 semester. I will contact instructors via email in early November of 2015 to ask for volunteers to post my questionnaire in their courses (Appendix A). I will request that the participation request (Appendix B) and questionnaire (Appendix C) be sent as an email a week before and the day that class starts. The questionnaire will ask for contact information outside of the school email in order to improve chances of successfully contacting students should they be unsuccessful in the course. It will also contain electronic consent for me to access participation and final grade information (Appendix D).

### *Instruments*

#### Questionnaire:

All students in all sections of all courses being studied will be requested to complete a 23 question questionnaire at the beginning of the course (Appendix C). The purpose of administering the questionnaire is to establish expectations of online first-year composition courses from the students' perspective. The final question of the questionnaire will provide students with the option to be contacted for a future interview. If students select to be contacted, they will be taken to a page that will ask for contact information outside of the college system in the event that the student can no longer be reached through college communication resources, and will request permission from the student for the researcher to access participation data biweekly (last login and assignment submission information) via Blackboard as well as final grades via Blackboard (Appendix D). Final grades will be accessed 3 days after the course ends. This consent will satisfy the FERPA requirements as the student is allowing the information to be shared for the purposes of the study. If students do not select the option to be contacted for an interview, then their name and contact information are not collected.

The questionnaires will be designed using surveymonkey and will be administered by having instructors email the request to participate to their students (Appendix B). Surveys work well for collecting data on expectations because they allow for both multiple choice and short answer responses. It should help establish some demographic information and expectations before classes begin.

After consent to instructor consent to be enrolled as a TA and student consent to access participation information and grades have been received by the researcher, the researcher will provide the consent documentation to the Office of Institutional Research. The researcher will then be added to the Blackboard courses with participating instructors and students. After being enrolled as a TA in Blackboard, the researcher will send an email informing all students of my role and assuring students that are not participating that I will not be observing their activity in the course. The researcher will then go to the Grade Center and manually hide the students in the course that are not participating. This, coupled with running individual student reports, will allow the researcher to protect non-participating students.

#### Interviews:

The interviews will begin as soon as students begin dropping the course. Because NOVA no longer has a late enrollment policy, this will likely happen the first week of classes. The interviews will be approximately 20 minutes and will focus on finding the reasons that students have dropped the composition courses (Appendix E). The participants will be given the choice between an email or a telephone interview and if they are not responsive to the preferred method, the other form of interview will be attempted.

### *Instruments*

#### Questionnaire:

All students in all sections of all courses being studied will be requested to complete a 23 question questionnaire at the beginning of the course (Appendix C). The purpose of administering the questionnaire is to establish expectations of online first-year composition courses from the students' perspective. The questionnaire will also ask for contact information outside of the college system in the event that the student can no longer be reached through college communication resources, and will request permission from the student for the instructor to provide the researcher with information about student participation and grades throughout the

semester (Appendix D). This consent will satisfy the FERPA requirements as the student is allowing the information to be shared for the purposes of the study.

The questionnaires will be designed using surveymonkey and will be administered by having instructors email the request to participate to their students (Appendix B). Surveys work well for collecting data on expectations because they allow for both multiple choice and short answer responses. It should help establish some demographic information and expectations before classes begin.

Interviews:

The interviews will begin as soon as students begin dropping the course. Because NOVA no longer has a late enrollment policy, this will likely happen the first week of classes. The interviews will be approximately 20 minutes and will focus on finding the reasons that students have dropped the composition courses (Appendix E). The participants will be given the choice between an email or a telephone interview and if they are not responsive to the preferred method, the other form of interview will be attempted.

The interview questions have been written by the researcher, and the email interviews will be sent using the researcher's Old Dominion University email account. The email interviews are a good option for this population as online students tend to be very busy and this might result in more responses. However, because writing might be a part of the reason students are not successful, telephone interviews will also be offered and conducted. The calls will be both recorded and transcribed and the data will be entered into NVivo. Telephone interviews are a good option for collecting this type of data from this population because this population might not be inclined to fill out a questionnaire for lack of motivation, might be embarrassed about their situation and need further prompting, and might respond most positively to a dialogue. This method is also most useful for this type of data collection because it does allow for more open ended follow up questions that allow the interviewee to provide more information.

*Incentive:*

Because first-year composition students online might be less inclined to participate in a voluntary study, my request for participation will include an offer to be entered into a drawing for 1 of 4 \$50 Amazon giftcards. Because those that are no longer taking the class or stopped participating may be even less inclined, the same offer will be made to those who volunteer for the interview.

## **2. Benefits of the study for NOVA**

This study would benefit NOVA by potentially providing reasons why ENG111 and ENG112 ELI students are not successful (meaning either they fail or withdraw from the course). The retention of students in an individual class impacts the retention of students in the institution as a whole. As noted in the study description, students who are not successful in their courses tend to not complete a degree at the institution. There are approximately 15 sections of these ELI courses offered each semester. At a 27 student cap, these courses could potentially have a large impact on institutional retention at NOVA. Understanding why students are leaving these course may help NOVA instructors and administrators begin to address the cause for not being retained, which may in turn help increase overall institutional retention.

## **3. Researcher's credentials.**



The investigator has been teaching and designing online writing courses since the Spring of 2009. She has conducted prior research on teaching and learning with technologies that has been presented at conferences and includes a publication on using SoundCloud to provide audio feedback to writing students. She is currently a PhD candidate in English at Old Dominion University and this research will be used for the dissertation requirement.

**5. I will provide NOVA with a final report of the project that includes findings and implications.**



**6. Requirements for research with human subjects:**

- (a) I agree to protect the confidentiality of individual information.



- (b) I agree to comply strictly with the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human

Participants.



The materials to be distributed, located in the Appendices below, describe how these principles will be met. Additionally, this study has previously been approved by the IRB Review Committee of the College of Arts and Letters at Old Dominion University.

- (c) Immediate Supervisor: Cheri Lemieux-Spiegel  
Address: Northern Virginia Community College  
8333 Little River Turnpike  
Annandale, VA 22003  
Phone: 703.323.4212

Questions of ethical conduct may be addressed to Cheri Lemieux-Spiegel. Copies of the form will be provided to all subjects.



- (d) The questionnaires will be emailed to students before classes start, and the interviews will be conducted after class ends to avoid the use of class time.

- (e) The researcher will insure that participation is voluntary by indicating such in all correspondence with faculty and students. When requesting participation, it will be indicated by the researcher that their participation will not affect their employment, grades, etc. at the College.

### **Materials to be Distributed (Appendices)**

#### ***Appendix A***

##### *Email to Instructors Requesting Participation*

Dear Instructor,

I am currently a PhD Candidate at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA, and I am working on my dissertation. I'm an ELI adjunct with the English Department at the Annandale campus as well. My dissertation is on retention in online first-year composition courses, and I'm specifically focusing on the perspective of the students who are not being "retained." I'm hoping that starting to understand student expectations about these courses and how those expectations match with their experiences and perceptions of success may help shed some light on why we lose so many of our students online. I've created a survey with open and closed ended questions and have IRB approval. I will also be interviewing students, and in order to determine which students I'll be interviewing, I'll be accessing the consenting students' participation and final grades through Blackboard.

I am asking for your assistance in the Spring 2016 semester. I would need you to send my request for participation to students via email 3 days before classes start with a reminder the day that classes start. I would also need you to consent to having me added as a TA to your course in order to observe the consenting students' participation. Your participation is completely voluntary and without penalty.

If this is something you are willing to do, please email me at [cmitchum@nvcc.edu](mailto:cmitchum@nvcc.edu). Please include the following statement in your email: I agree to have Catrina Mitchum enrolled as a TA in my Spring 2016 ENG111/112 course for the purposes of tracking specific student participation for research in retention studies. I understand that I am not required to give consent and am providing it voluntarily.

Thank you for your help!

Catrina Mitchum

#### ***Appendix B***

##### *Email to Students Requesting Participation*

Dear ENG111/112 Students,

I'm an ELI instructor with NOVA Annandale, and I'm also a PhD student at Old Dominion University (ODU) in Norfolk, Virginia. I'm researching student success in online first-year

composition courses at NOVA Annandale, and I need student volunteers that are willing to take a quick survey and possibly participate in a follow up interview. Your participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and you will not be forced to answer any of the questions. However, I would sincerely appreciate honest and complete answers.

As a “Thank you” for your time, completing the survey will give you the opportunity to enter a drawing for 1 of 4 \$50 Amazon giftcards. After completing the survey, you will have 3 options. The first is to not be entered into the drawing and not be contacted for an interview. The second option will only enter you into the drawing and once the drawing is complete, your information will be deleted. The third will enter you into the drawing and allow me to contact you in the future for an interview.

There will be no penalty for not participating, and you can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You can contact NOVA’s Office of Institutional Research at 703-323-3129 regarding your rights as a study participant as well as ODU’s Institutional Research Office at 757-683-3080. You must be 18 years or older to participate.

If you are willing to participate in the survey, and you are 18 years of age or older, please click the following link: insert link.

Thank you,

Catrina Mitchum  
English Studies Doctoral Candidate  
Old Dominion University  
NOVA ELI Faculty  
[609-425-7968](tel:609-425-7968)  
[cmite022@odu.edu](mailto:cmite022@odu.edu)

### ***Appendix C*** ***Consent for Questionnaire***

#### **Overview:**

The purpose of this study is to examine student success in online first-year composition classes. The study is being conducted by Catrina Mitchum, a PhD Candidate at Old Dominion University; Shelley Rodrigo, Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Arizona and Julia Romberger, Associate Professor in the Department of English at Old Dominion University. You’re being invited to participate in the study because you have enrolled in an online section of ENG111 or ENG112 through NOVA Annandale.

#### **Participation:**

There are two steps in participating. The first is to complete the questionnaire, and the second is consenting to be contacted for a possible follow-up interview. The online questionnaire should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time or skip questions you don’t feel comfortable answering.

You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study. If you consent to participating in the interview, some of your questionnaire answers might be used in the interview questions.

### **Incentives, Risks, and Benefits:**

As a “Thank you” for your time, completing the questionnaire will give you the opportunity to enter a drawing for 1 of 4 \$50 Amazon giftcards. After completing the questionnaire, you will have 2 options to enter your personal information for the drawing. The first option will enter you into the drawing and allow me to contact you in the future for an interview. If you select this option, the questionnaire will not be anonymous, but every effort will be taken to protect your information. As soon as your responses are assigned a code, the code will be used to identify your responses on the questionnaire and the interview from then on. The second option will only enter you into the drawing and once the drawing is complete, your information will be deleted. The third option opts out of the drawing entirely. If you decide to participate in the second step of the study, your information will remain confidential by using password protected storage for the data and the coding system mentioned above. Aside from potential data breaches, there are no known risks to participating in this study. The benefits are that the study is being conducted in the hope that beginning to understand student success in online first-year composition classes might result in more students being successful in these courses.

### **After the study:**

The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes and any publication of the study results will not include any identifiable information. This study has been reviewed by Old Dominion University in accordance with the IRB standards for research involving human participants.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:

Catrina Mitchum  
[cmite022@odu.edu](mailto:cmite022@odu.edu)

or

NOVA’s Office of Institutional Research  
 703-323-3129

### **Electronic Consent:**

By checking this box, you are indicating that you have read the information above, you are 18 years of age or older, and you are voluntarily participating in the first step of the study, the questionnaire.

By checking this box, you are indicating that you do not wish to participate.

### *Questionnaire Questions*

1. How many weeks is the ENG111/112 course that you’re enrolled in?

- a. 16-weeks
  - b. 8-weeks
  - c. 12-weeks
2. Why did you choose to take the online version of ENG111/112?
3. How often do you expect to communicate via email or course tools with your peers? (For example, asking questions, responding to questions, etc.)
  - a. Every Day
  - b. A few days a week
  - c. Once a week
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Once during the semester
  - f. Not at all
  - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
4. How often do you expect to communicate via email or course tools with your instructor? (For example, asking questions, responding to questions, etc.)
  - a. Every Day
  - b. A few days a week
  - c. Once a week
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Once during the semester
  - f. Not at all
  - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
5. How much effort do you expect to put into these communications?
  - a. Maximum Effort
  - b. Significant Effort
  - c. Average Effort
  - d. Minimal Effort
  - e. No Effort
6. How often do you expect to participate (including posting, reading, writing, brainstorming) in the course?
  - a. More than once a day
  - b. Once every Day
  - c. 3-5 days a week
  - d. Once a week
  - e. Every other week
  - f. Once a month
  - g. Once during the semester
  - h. Not at all
  - i. Other\_\_\_\_\_

7. How much time do you expect to put into completing your assigned coursework?
  - a. 0 hours a week
  - b. 1-3 hours a week
  - c. 4-6 hours a week
  - d. 7-9 hours a week
  - e. 10-12 hours a week
  - f. 13-15 hours a week
  - g. 16-18 hours a week
  - h. more than 18 hours a week
8. How much effort do you expect to put into completing your assigned coursework?
  - a. Maximum Effort
  - b. Significant Effort
  - c. Average Effort
  - d. Minimal Effort
  - e. No Effort
9. How easy/difficult do you expect the course to be?
  - a. Very Difficult
  - b. Difficult
  - c. Somewhat Difficult
  - d. Somewhat Easy
  - e. Easy
  - f. Very Easy
  - g. I'm not sure what to expect
10. What makes a class easy or difficult?
11. What do you expect to learn about writing in this course?
12. Are you expecting your experience to be different than taking ENG111/112 face-to-face?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
13. Why or why not?
14. Before you signed up for ENG111/ENG112, how much did you know about taking online courses?
  - a. I am very knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
  - b. I am somewhat knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
  - c. I am not very knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
  - d. I am not at all knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
15. How/where did you learn about taking online courses?
16. How much total financial aid are you receiving this semester?
  - a. \$0
  - b. \$1-\$500
  - c. \$501-\$1000

- d. \$1001-\$1500
  - e. \$1501-\$2000
  - f. \$2001-\$2500
  - g. Other: Please Specify
17. How much support do you feel you receive from friends and family? (Support, in this question, means having the necessary help you need to be able to complete your school work. That might be financial support, emotional support, a physical space to work in, and/or something like helping out with childcare or housework.)
- a. I receive a lot of support from friends and family
  - b. I receive an average amount of support from friends and family
  - c. I receive some support from friends and family
  - d. I receive little support from friends and family
  - e. I receive no support from friends and family
18. ELI or NOVA Annandale offer a variety of student support services. Which student support services are you aware of? Please select all that apply
- a. Career Counseling
  - b. Transfer Planning
  - c. Advising and Counseling
  - d. IT Help Desk
  - e. Cooperative Education & Internships
  - f. Library Services
  - g. College Pathway Initiatives
  - h. Disability Services
  - i. GPA Calculator
  - j. GPS for Success
  - k. Open Computer Labs
  - l. Student Handbook
  - m. Student Services Center Locations
  - n. Testing Centers
  - o. Online Tutoring Services
  - p. Campus Tutoring Services
  - q. Free Software Downloads
  - r. Cloud Printing and Storage
  - s. Veteran's Affairs
  - t. International Student Resources
19. How did you learn about these services?

20. If you remember, what was your high-school GPA?
- a. 3.5 or above (most B+/A-/ A)
  - b. 3.0-3.49 (mostly B/B+)
  - c. 2.5-2.99 (mostly C+/B-)
  - d. 2.0-2.49 (mostly C/C+)
  - e. 1.5-1.99 (mostly D+/C-)
  - f. 1.0-1.49 (mostly D/D+)
  - g. .5-.99 (mostly F/D-)
  - h. 0-.49 (mostly F)
  - i. Can't remember
21. What is your current GPA? If you're not sure, you can open a new browser, login to My NOVA, click on "VCCS SIS: Student Information System," click on "Academic Records," click on "View Unofficial Transcript," then select "Student Unofficial" in the "Report Type" dropdown, then select "Go." Your GPA is located in your unofficial transcript.  
Please Enter GPA or "Unsure":
22. Please indicate the highest level of education your parents have received.
- a. Mother
    - i. Did not graduate HS
    - ii. Graduated HS or received GED
    - iii. Completed Some college
    - iv. Completed Associates Degree
    - v. Completed Bachelor's Degree
    - vi. Completed Graduate Degree
    - vii. Other
    - viii. I don't know
  - b. Father
    - i. Did not graduate HS
    - ii. Graduated HS or received GED
    - iii. Completed Some college
    - iv. Completed Associates Degree
    - v. Completed Bachelor's Degree
    - vi. Completed Graduate Degree
    - vii. Other
    - viii. I don't know
23. What year did you graduate High School or receive your GED?

## ***Appendix D***

### *Electronic Consent to be Contacted for Interviews*



By checking this box, I agree to be contacted during the Spring Semester 2016 for an interview regarding my success in ENG111/112. I also agree to allow the researcher to log my participation in the course, this means biweekly recording of the date I last logged in and whether or not assignments were submitted, as well as my final grade through Blackboard. I understand that this information will be coded and stored on a secure network. My information will be protected, and I will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. I will be entered into an additional drawing when my interview has been completed.

(If students check the first box, they will be taken to a screen that allows them to select one of the following:

By checking this box, I agree to have my questionnaire responses used in the interview, should I be contacted.

By checking this box, I do not agree to have my questionnaire responses used in the interview, should I be contacted.)

By checking this box, I do not agree to be interviewed later, but I would like to be entered into the drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. I understand that the information collected on the next page will only be used for the purposes of the drawing and will be deleted when the drawing is complete.

By checking this box, I do not agree to be interviewed and I would not like to be entered into the drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card.

## ***Appendix E***

### ***Interview Language and Questions***

Hello, thank you for agreeing to participate in the follow-up interview. As I mentioned in the email and questionnaire at the beginning of the semester, I am working on a project focused on student success in online courses. I am hoping you can help me by allowing me to interview you about your experiences. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can choose not to talk to me at all or you can refuse to answer any question that you do not feel comfortable with. You can also withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. However, I do hope you will help me by answering as truthfully and completely as you can. This interview is not anonymous, as I know who you are and will know how you respond. However, I will keep what I hear confidential and no names or other identifiers will be attached to my notes, the recording or the email, so the information you provide will remain anonymous. Further, I will be talking to about X other people and when I report my findings, I will do so in the aggregate and thereby keep your identity and responses anonymous. Do you have any questions? [If not] Can we proceed with the interview?

Language altered for email interviews:

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in the follow-up interview. As I mentioned in the email and questionnaire at the beginning of the semester, I am working on a project focused on student success in online courses. I am hoping you can help me by allowing me to interview you about your experiences. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can choose not to

answer any question that you do not feel comfortable with. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. However, I do hope you will help me by answering as truthfully and completely as you can. This interview is not anonymous, as I know who you are and will know how you respond. However, I will keep what you type confidential and no names or other identifiers will be attached to the responses, or the email, so the information you provide will remain anonymous.

To complete the interview, you can either download the attached Word document and email it back to me or you can click on the following link: [Student Success Interview](#) and answer the questions there. Whatever is more convenient for you.

As promised, you will be entered into another drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card and will be contacted via email if you win.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Best,

Catrina Mitchum  
PhD Candidate  
Old Dominion University  
or  
NOVA's Office of Institutional Research  
703-323-3129

1. What life events (such as a death in the family, illness, additions to the family, etc.) have you experienced since the course started?
  - a. Do you feel it affected your performance in the course?
  - b. Why/why not? How so?
2. Did you learn everything you expected to in the course?
  - a. What was it you were trying to learn?
3. We are contacting you because (it appears) you are no longer active in the course. Why did you [withdraw or stop participating] in the course?
  - a. Were the other students or the instructor a factor?
  - b. Was the course content a factor?
  - c. Was the difficulty level a factor?
  - d. How so?
4. Do you feel you were successful in the course up to the point where you [withdrew or stopped participating]?
  - a. What part of the experience (grades, instructor feedback, confidence) made you feel that way?

5. What do you feel were contributing factors to your performance in the course?
  - a. Do you feel your performance was positive or negative? Why?
  - b. What might have been changed about the course in order to make your performance more positive?
  - c. What frustrations did you encounter?
6. Did your experiences in the course live up to your expectations? (I'm hoping to be able to bring in something from the student's questionnaire here)
  - a. In what ways did your experiences in the course not match your expectations?
  - b. In what ways did they match?
7. In what ways was the online writing course similar to a face-to-face course? In what ways was it different?
  - a. Do you think taking the course face-to-face could have affected your performance?
8. Do you feel you were prepared for the challenges of online learning such as time management, time spent, technical issues, self-discipline, and feeling isolated from peers?
  - a. What might have made you more prepared? or What made you prepared?
9. How often did you communicate with your peers?
  - a. Every Day
  - b. A few days a week
  - c. Once a week
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Once during the semester
  - f. Not at all
  - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
10. How often did you communicate with your instructor?
  - a. Every Day
  - b. A few days a week
  - c. Once a week
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Once during the semester
  - f. Not at all
  - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
11. How much time did you spend on coursework?
  - a. 0 hours a week
  - b. 1-3 hours a week
  - c. 3-6 hours a week
  - d. 6-9 hours a week
  - e. 9-12 hours a week
  - f. 12-15 hours a week
  - g. 15-18 hours a week

- h. more than 18 hours a week
12. How difficult was the course?
- a. Very Difficult
  - b. Difficult
  - c. Somewhat Difficult
  - d. Somewhat Easy
  - e. Easy
  - f. Very Easy
13. Did you get support from friends and family?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
14. Which of the following student services offered at NOVA did you use this semester?
- a. Career Counseling
  - b. Transfer Planning
  - c. Advising and Counseling
  - d. IT Help Desk
  - e. Cooperative Education & Internships
  - f. Library Services
  - g. College Pathway Initiatives
  - h. Disability Services
  - i. GPA Calculator
  - j. GPS for Success
  - k. Open Computer Labs
  - l. Student Handbook
  - m. Student Services Center Locations
  - n. Testing Centers
  - o. Online Tutoring Services
  - p. Campus Tutoring Services
  - q. Free Software Downloads
  - r. Cloud Printing and Storage
  - s. Veteran's Affairs
  - t. International Student Resources
  - u. I did not use any student services
15. Is there anything you think could have helped you complete the course?

## References

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## Appendix C

### **Instructor Consent Form**

#### **Overview:**

The purpose of this study is to examine student success in online first-year composition classes. The study is being conducted by Catrina Mitchum, a PhD Candidate at Old Dominion University; Shelley Rodrigo, Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Arizona and Julia Romberger, Associate Professor in the Department of English at Old Dominion University. You're being invited to participate in the study because you teaching an online section of ENG111 or ENG112 through NOVA Annandale.

#### **Participation:**

Signing this consent form will give the researcher, Catrina Mitchum, access to your assigned sections of 111 or 112 for the Spring 2016 semester. The researcher will be added to the course under the role of "Teaching Assistant." After signing this consent form, there are will be no further requests of you.

#### **Incentives, Risks, and Benefits:**

While there are no immediate gains to be had by instructors, the purpose of this research is to help improve retention rates in our online courses. To do this, the researcher will be tracking participating students' participation and final grades. However, your own work and participation within the course will not be tracked or evaluated. The researcher will only be accessing information for students that have also signed a consent form. There are, therefore, no anticipated risks in you participating in this study. The benefits are that the study is being conducted in the hope that beginning to understand student success in online first-year composition classes might result in more students being successful in these courses.

#### **After the study:**

The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes and any publication of the study results will not include any identifiable information. This study has been reviewed by Old Dominion University in accordance with the IRB standards for research involving human participants. It has received approval from NOVA's Office of Institutional Research.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:

Catrina Mitchum or NOVA's Office of Institutional Research  
[cmitch022@odu.edu](mailto:cmitch022@odu.edu) 703-323-3129

Immediate Supervisor: Cheri Lemieux-Spiegel  
 Address: Northern Virginia Community College  
 8333 Little River Turnpike  
 Annandale, VA 22003



Phone: 703.323.4212

Questions of ethical conduct may be addressed to Cheri Lemieux-Spiegel.

I consent for the researcher, Catrina Mitchum, to be added as a TA to my 111/112 Blackboard courses for Spring 2016.

Type Name:

Sign: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Student Consent Form

#### Overview:

The purpose of this study is to examine student success in online first-year composition classes. The study is being conducted by Catrina Mitchum, a PhD Candidate at Old Dominion University and Adjunct Instructor at NOVA Annandale; Shelley Rodrigo, Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Arizona and Julia Romberger, Associate Professor in the Department of English at Old Dominion University. You're being invited to participate in the second part of this study because you indicated your interest to be part of the second phase on the Student Success Questionnaire.

#### Participation:

You have already completed the first phase of participation: completing the questionnaire. The second phase of participation is allowing the researcher to track your participation in the course, access your final grade in the course, and then contact you for an interview. This will be done in biweekly progress reports that are coded for each student so that identifying information is not being stored outside of Blackboard. You will not need to do anything to generate these reports or provide any information to the researcher. If you are contacted for an interview, the interview will be approximately 10-15 minutes using the preferred method indicated on the questionnaire. Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time or skip questions you don't feel comfortable answering. You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study.

#### Incentives, Risks, and Benefits:

As a "Thank you" for your time, after the interview has been completed you will be entered into a second drawing for 1 of 4 \$50 Amazon giftcards. Your information will remain confidential by using password-protected storage for the data and the coding system mentioned above. Aside from potential data breaches, there are no known risks to participating in this study. The benefits are that the study is being conducted in the hope that beginning to understand student success in online first-year composition classes might result in more students being successful in these courses.

#### After the study:

The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes and any publication of the study results will not include any identifiable information. This study has been reviewed by Old Dominion University in accordance with the IRB standards for research involving human participants.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:  
Catrina Mitchum NOVA's Office of Institutional Research  
[cmite022@odu.edu](mailto:cmite022@odu.edu) 703-323-3129

Immediate Supervisor: Cheri Lemieux-Spiegel

Address: Northern Virginia Community College, 8333 Little River Turnpike Annandale, VA 22003

Phone: 703.323.4212

Questions of ethical conduct may be addressed to Cheri Lemieux-Spiegel.

I consent to be contacted during the Spring Semester 2016 for an interview regarding my success in ENG111/112. I consent to have the researcher, Catrina Mitchum, monitor my participation in the course, which means biweekly recording of the date I last logged in and whether or not assignments were submitted, as well as my final grade through Blackboard. I understand that this information will be coded and stored on a secure network. My information will be protected, and I will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card once my interview is completed.

Type Full Name:

Sign: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### *Consent for Questionnaire*

#### **Overview:**

The purpose of this study is to examine student success in online first-year composition classes. The study is being conducted by Catrina Mitchum, a PhD Candidate at Old Dominion University; Shelley Rodrigo, Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Arizona and Julia Romberger, Associate Professor in the Department of English at Old Dominion University. You're being invited to participate in the study because you have enrolled in an online section of ENG111 or ENG112 through NOVA Annandale.

#### **Participation:**

There are two steps in participating. The first is to complete the questionnaire, and the second is consenting to be contacted for a possible follow-up interview. The online questionnaire should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time or skip questions you don't feel comfortable answering. You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study. If you consent to participating in the interview, some of your questionnaire answers might be used in the interview questions.

#### **Incentives, Risks, and Benefits:**

As a "Thank you" for your time, completing the questionnaire will give you the opportunity to enter a drawing for 1 of 4 \$50 Amazon giftcards. After completing the questionnaire, you will have 2 options to enter your personal information for the drawing. The first option will enter you into the drawing and allow me to contact you in the future for an interview. If you select this option, the questionnaire will not be anonymous, but every effort will be taken to protect your information. As soon as your responses are assigned a code, the code will be used to identify your responses on the questionnaire and the interview from then on. The second option will only enter you into the drawing and once the drawing is complete, your information will be deleted. The third option opts out of the drawing entirely. If you decide to participate in the second step of the study, your information will remain confidential by using password protected storage for the data and the coding system mentioned above. Aside from potential data breaches, there are no known risks to participating in this study. The benefits are that the study is being conducted in the hope that beginning to understand student success in online first-year composition classes might result in more students being successful in these courses.

#### **After the study:**

The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes and any publication of the study results will not include any identifiable information. This study has been reviewed by Old Dominion University in accordance with the IRB standards for research involving human participants.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:

Catrina Mitchum  
[cmitc022@odu.edu](mailto:cmitc022@odu.edu)

or

NOVA's Office of Institutional Research  
 703-323-3129

### **Electronic Consent:**

By checking this box, you are indicating that you have read the information above, you are 18 years of age or older, and you are voluntarily participating in the first step of the study, the questionnaire.

By checking this box, you are indicating that you do not wish to participate.

### *Questionnaire Questions*

1. Which English course are you taking online through ELI at NOVA?
  - a. ENG111 (College Composition I)
  - b. ENG112 (College Composition II)
2. Which section of ENG111/ENG112 are you enrolled in? (\*Note-These were separate questions that SurveyMonkey went immediately to depending on the answer to the previous question)
  - a. ENG111-E01N
  - b. E02N
  - c. E06N
  - d. E08N
  - e. E40N
  - f. E42N
  - g. E60N
  - h. E62N
  - i. E81N
  - j. E85N
  - k. ENG112-E07N
  - l. E08N
  - m. E09N
  - n. E10N
  - o. E40N
  - p. E42N
  - q. E43N
  - r. E45N
  - s. E57N
  - t. E60N
  - u. E70N

- v. E71N
  - w. E82N
  - x. E83N
  - y. E85N
  - z. E86N
3. Why did you choose to take the online version of ENG111/112?
  4. How often do you expect to communicate via email or course tools with your peers? (For example, asking questions, responding to questions, etc.)
    - a. Every Day
    - b. A few days a week
    - c. Once a week
    - d. Once a month
    - e. Once during the semester
    - f. Not at all
    - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
  5. How often do you expect to communicate via email or course tools with your instructor? (For example, asking questions, responding to questions, etc.)
    - a. Every Day
    - b. A few days a week
    - c. Once a week
    - d. Once a month
    - e. Once during the semester
    - f. Not at all
    - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
  6. How much effort do you expect to put into these communications?
    - a. Maximum Effort
    - b. Significant Effort
    - c. Average Effort
    - d. Minimal Effort
    - e. No Effort
  7. How often do you expect to participate (including posting, reading, writing, brainstorming) in the course?
    - a. More than once a day
    - b. Once every Day
    - c. 3-5 days a week
    - d. Once a week
    - e. Every other week
    - f. Once a month
    - g. Once during the semester

- h. Not at all
  - i. Other\_\_\_\_\_
8. How much time do you expect to put into completing your assigned coursework?
- a. 0 hours a week
  - b. 1-3 hours a week
  - c. 4-6 hours a week
  - d. 7-9 hours a week
  - e. 10-12 hours a week
  - f. 13-15 hours a week
  - g. 16-18 hours a week
  - h. more than 18 hours a week
9. How much effort do you expect to put into completing your assigned coursework?
- a. Maximum Effort
  - b. Significant Effort
  - c. Average Effort
  - d. Minimal Effort
  - e. No Effort
10. How easy/difficult do you expect the course to be?
- a. Very Difficult
  - b. Difficult
  - c. Somewhat Difficult
  - d. Somewhat Easy
  - e. Easy
  - f. Very Easy
  - g. I'm not sure what to expect
11. What makes a class easy or difficult?
12. What do you expect to learn about writing in this course?
13. Are you expecting your experience to be different than taking ENG111/112 face-to-face?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
14. Why or why not?
15. Before you signed up for ENG111/ENG112, how much did you know about taking online courses?
- a. I am very knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
  - b. I am somewhat knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
  - c. I am not very knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
  - d. I am not at all knowledgeable about what is involved in taking online courses
16. How/where did you learn about taking online courses?
17. How much total financial aid are you receiving this semester?
- a. \$0

- b. \$1-\$500
  - c. \$501-\$1000
  - d. \$1001-\$1500
  - e. \$1501-\$2000
  - f. \$2001-\$2500
  - g. Other: Please Specify
18. How much support do you feel you receive from friends and family? (Support, in this question, means having the necessary help you need to be able to complete your school work. That might be financial support, emotional support, a physical space to work in, and/or something like helping out with childcare or housework.)
- a. I receive a lot of support from friends and family
  - b. I receive an average amount of support from friends and family
  - c. I receive some support from friends and family
  - d. I receive little support from friends and family
  - e. I receive no support from friends and family
19. ELI or NOVA Annandale offer a variety of student support services. Which student support services are you aware of? Please select all that apply
- a. Career Counseling
  - b. Transfer Planning
  - c. Advising and Counseling
  - d. IT Help Desk
  - e. Cooperative Education & Internships
  - f. Library Services
  - g. College Pathway Initiatives
  - h. Disability Services
  - i. GPA Calculator
  - j. GPS for Success
  - k. Open Computer Labs
  - l. Student Handbook
  - m. Student Services Center Locations
  - n. Testing Centers
  - o. Online Tutoring Services
  - p. Campus Tutoring Services
  - q. Free Software Downloads
  - r. Cloud Printing and Storage
  - s. Veteran's Affairs



- t. International Student Resources
20. How did you learn about these services?
21. If you remember, what was your high-school GPA?
- a. 3.5 or above (most B+/A-/ A)
  - b. 3.0-3.49 (mostly B/B+)
  - c. 2.5-2.99 (mostly C+/B-)
  - d. 2.0-2.49 (mostly C/C+)
  - e. 1.5-1.99 (mostly D+/C-)
  - f. 1.0-1.49 (mostly D/D+)
  - g. .5-.99 (mostly F/D-)
  - h. 0-.49 (mostly F)
  - i. Can't remember
22. What is your current GPA? If you're not sure, you can open a new browser, login to My NOVA, click on "VCCS SIS: Student Information System," click on "Academic Records," click on "View Unofficial Transcript," then select "Student Unofficial" in the "Report Type" dropdown, then select "Go." Your GPA is located in your unofficial transcript.  
Please Enter GPA or "Unsure":
23. Please indicate the highest level of education your parents have received.
- a. Mother
    - i. Did not graduate HS
    - ii. Graduated HS or received GED
    - iii. Completed Some college
    - iv. Completed Associates Degree
    - v. Completed Bachelor's Degree
    - vi. Completed Graduate Degree
    - vii. Other
    - viii. I don't know
  - b. Father
    - i. Did not graduate HS
    - ii. Graduated HS or received GED
    - iii. Completed Some college
    - iv. Completed Associates Degree
    - v. Completed Bachelor's Degree
    - vi. Completed Graduate Degree
    - vii. Other
    - viii. I don't know
24. What year did you graduate High School or receive your GED?

## Appendix F

### *Electronic Consent to be Contacted for Interviews*

By checking this box, I agree to be contacted during the Spring Semester 2016 for an interview regarding my success in ENG111/112. I also agree to allow the researcher to log my participation in the course, this means biweekly recording of the date I last logged in and whether or not assignments were submitted, as well as my final grade through Blackboard. I understand that this information will be coded and stored on a secure network. My information will be protected, and I will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. I will be entered into an additional drawing when my interview has been completed.

(If students check the first box, they will be taken to a screen that allows them to select one of the following:

By checking this box, I agree to have my questionnaire responses used in the interview, should I be contacted.

By checking this box, I do not agree to have my questionnaire responses used in the interview, should I be contacted.)

By checking this box, I do not agree to be interviewed later, but I would like to be entered into the drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. I understand that the information collected on the next page will only be used for the purposes of the drawing and will be deleted when the drawing is complete.

By checking this box, I do not agree to be interviewed and I would not like to be entered into the drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card.

### *Interview Language and Questions*

Hello, thank you for agreeing to participate in the follow-up interview. As I mentioned in the email and questionnaire at the beginning of the semester, I am working on a project focused on student success in online courses. I am hoping you can help me by allowing me to interview you about your experiences. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can choose not to talk to me at all or you can refuse to answer any question that you do not feel comfortable with. You can also withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. However, I do hope you will help me by answering as truthfully and completely as you can. This interview is not anonymous, as I know who you are and will know how you respond. However, I will keep what I hear confidential and no names or other identifiers will be attached to my notes, the recording or the email, so the information you provide will remain anonymous. Further, I will be talking to about X other people and when I report my findings, I will do so in the aggregate and thereby keep your identity and responses anonymous. Do you have any questions? [If not] Can we proceed with the interview?

Language altered for email interviews:

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in the follow-up interview. As I mentioned in the email and questionnaire at the beginning of the semester, I am working on a project focused on student success in online courses. I am hoping you can help me by allowing me to interview you about your experiences. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can choose not to answer any question that you do not feel comfortable with. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. However, I do hope you will help me by answering as truthfully and completely as you can. This interview is not anonymous, as I know who you are and will know how you respond. However, I will keep what you type confidential and no names or other identifiers will be attached to the responses, or the email, so the information you provide will remain anonymous.

To complete the interview, you can either download the attached Word document and email it back to me or you can click on the following link: [Student Success Interview](#) and answer the questions there. Whatever is more convenient for you.

As promised, you will be entered into another drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card and will be contacted via email if you win.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Best,

Catrina Mitchum  
PhD Candidate  
Old Dominion University  
or  
NOVA's Office of Institutional Research  
703-323-3129

### *Questions*

1. What life events (such as a death in the family, illness, additions to the family, etc.) have you experienced since the course started?
  - a. Do you feel it affected your performance in the course?
  - b. Why/why not? How so?
2. Did you learn everything you expected to in the course?
  - a. What was it you were trying to learn?
3. We are contacting you because (it appears) you are no longer active in the course. Why did you [withdraw or stop participating] in the course?
  - a. Were the other students or the instructor a factor?
  - b. Was the course content a factor?
  - c. Was the difficulty level a factor?
  - d. How so?

4. Do you feel you were successful in the course up to the point where you [withdrew or stopped participating]?
  - a. What part of the experience (grades, instructor feedback, confidence) made you feel that way?
5. What do you feel were contributing factors to your performance in the course?
  - a. Do you feel your performance was positive or negative? Why?
  - b. What might have been changed about the course in order to make your performance more positive?
  - c. What frustrations did you encounter?
6. Did your experiences in the course live up to your expectations? (I'm hoping to be able to bring in something from the student's questionnaire here)
  - a. In what ways did your experiences in the course not match your expectations?
  - b. In what ways did they match?
7. In what ways was the online writing course similar to a face-to-face course? In what ways was it different?
  - a. Do you think taking the course face-to-face could have affected your performance?
8. Do you feel you were prepared for the challenges of online learning such as time management, time spent, technical issues, self-discipline, and feeling isolated from peers?
  - a. What might have made you more prepared? or What made you prepared?
9. How often did you communicate with your peers?
  - a. Every Day
  - b. A few days a week
  - c. Once a week
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Once during the semester
  - f. Not at all
  - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
10. How often did you communicate with your instructor?
  - a. Every Day
  - b. A few days a week
  - c. Once a week
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Once during the semester
  - f. Not at all
  - g. Other\_\_\_\_\_
11. How much time did you spend on coursework?
  - a. 0 hours a week
  - b. 1-3 hours a week
  - c. 3-6 hours a week

- d. 6-9 hours a week
  - e. 9-12 hours a week
  - f. 12-15 hours a week
  - g. 15-18 hours a week
  - h. more than 18 hours a week
12. How difficult was the course?
- a. Very Difficult
  - b. Difficult
  - c. Somewhat Difficult
  - d. Somewhat Easy
  - e. Easy
  - f. Very Easy
13. Did you get support from friends and family?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
14. Which of the following student services offered at NOVA did you use this semester?
- a. Career Counseling
  - b. Transfer Planning
  - c. Advising and Counseling
  - d. IT Help Desk
  - e. Cooperative Education & Internships
  - f. Library Services
  - g. College Pathway Initiatives
  - h. Disability Services
  - i. GPA Calculator
  - j. GPS for Success
  - k. Open Computer Labs
  - l. Student Handbook
  - m. Student Services Center Locations
  - n. Testing Centers
  - o. Online Tutoring Services
  - p. Campus Tutoring Services
  - q. Free Software Downloads
  - r. Cloud Printing and Storage
  - s. Veteran's Affairs
  - t. International Student Resources

- u. I did not use any student services
15. Is there anything you think could have helped you complete the course?

## Appendix G

All students who attempted the questionnaire were assigned a code. The alphabetic portion of the student codes were generated by identifying the institution, the campus and the semester to create the acronym NAS. N is for NOVA, A is for Annandale, and S is for Spring. The numerical portion of the codes for the students contacted for the interview were created by using the last two digits of the year (16) followed by the student's response position as a completed questionnaire (1-36). The generated codes for the students who agreed to be contacted for the interview were: NAS1601-NAS1636.

The students who completed the questionnaire but did not want to be contacted had the code NC (Not Contacted) included after the NAS16 portion of the code. This was followed by the student's response position in the questionnaire as an student that did not want to be contacted (1). The generated code for the student who completed the questionnaire but did not agree to be contacted was: NAS16NC1.

The students who completed all but two questions in the questionnaire were coded with NAS16, but this was followed by Inc (for Incomplete). Then, the student's response position as a mostly completed questionnaire (1-2) was used. The generated codes for the students who completed most of the questionnaire were: NAS16Inc1 and NAS16Inc2

The remaining students did not complete enough of the questionnaire to be used in this study and were coded as their respondent number and TI. The generated codes for these students were: 10TI, 11TI, 15TI, 31TI, 35TI, 37TI, 45TI.

## VITA

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**Publications**

McKittrick, M., Mitchum, C., & Spangler, S. (2014). "The Sound [sans] the Fury": The Efficacy of SoundCloud Audio Feedback in the Writing Classroom. *The Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology*, 3(2), 40-53. <https://doi.org/10.14434/jotlt.v3n2.12959>

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